
Disney
Star Darlings
Collection Volume 2
Vega and the Fashion Disaster
Scarlet Discovers True Strength
Cassie Comes Through
Shana Muldoon Zappa & Ahmet Zappa


Disney
Star Darlings
Collection Volume 2
Vega and the Fashion Disaster
Scarlet Discovers True Strength
Cassie Comes Through
Shana Muldoon Zanna & Ahmet Zanna



Vega and the Fashion Disaster

Scarlet Discovers True Strength

Cassie Comes Through

Shana Muldoon Zappa and Ahmet Zappa
with Zelda Rose

Disney Press
Los Angeles • New York

ALSO BY SHANA MULDOON ZAPPA AND AHMET ZAPPA

Sage and the Journey to Wishworld
Libby and the Class Election
Leona's Unlucky Mission
Vega and the Fashion Disaster
Scarlet Discovers True Strength
Cassie Comes Through
Piper's Perfect Dream
Astra's Mixed-Up Mission
Tessa's Lost and Found
Adora Finds a Friend
Clover's Parent Fix

ALSO BY AHMET ZAPPA

Because I'm Your Dad
The Monstrous Memoirs of a Mighty McFearless

DON'T MISS

A Wisher's Guide to Starland

COMING SOON

Gemma and the Ultimate Standoff

Copyright © 2016 Disney Enterprises, Inc.
Cover design © 2016 Disney Enterprises, Inc.

All rights reserved. Published by Disney Press, an imprint of Disney Book Group. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the publisher. For information address Disney Press, 1101 Flower Street, Glendale, California 91201.

Vega and the Fashion Disaster copyright © 2016 by Shana Muldoon Zappa and Ahmet Zappa
Scarlet Discovers True Strength copyright © 2016 by Shana Muldoon Zappa and Ahmet Zappa
Cassie Comes Through copyright © 2016 by Shana Muldoon Zappa and Ahmet Zappa

Excerpt from Star Darlings: *Piper's Perfect Dream* copyright © 2016 by Shana Muldoon Zappa and Ahmet Zappa.

ISBN 978-1-368-00112-0

For more Disney Press fun, visit www.disneybooks.com

Contents

Title Page
Also by Shana Muldoon Zappa & Ahmet Zappa
Copyright
Dedication
Starling Academy: Student Reports
About Vega, Scarlet, and Cassie
Introduction
Star Darlings: *Vega and the Fashion Disaster*
- Holo-Crossword Puzzle
- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9
- Epilogue

Star Darlings: *Scarlet Discovers True Strength*
- Prologue
- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6

Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Epilogue
Star Darlings: *Cassie Comes Through*
Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Epilogue
Glossary
Acknowledgments
Preview of Star Darlings: *Piper's Perfect Dream*
About the Authors

Halo Violetta Zappa. You are pure light, joy, and inspiration. We love you soooooo much.

May the Star Darlings continue to shine brightly upon you. May every step upon your path be blessed with positivity and the understanding that you have the power within you to manifest the most fulfilling life you can possibly dream of and more. May you always remember that being different and true to yourself makes your inner star shine brighter. And never ever stop making wishes.

Glow for it….
Mommy and Daddy

And to everyone else here on "Wishworld":

May you realize that no matter where you are in life, no matter what you look like or where you were born, you, too, have the power within you to create the life of your dreams. Through celebrating your own uniqueness, thinking positively, and taking action, you can make your wishes come true. May you understand that you are never alone. There is always someone near who will understand you if you look hard enough. The Star Darlings are here to remind you that there is an unstoppable energy to staying positive, wishing, and believing in yourself. That inner star shines within you.

Smile. The Star Darlings have your back.
We know how startastic you truly are.

Glow for it….
Your friends,
Shana and Ahmet

Starling Academy: Student Reports



NAME: Clover
BRIGHT DAY: January 5
FAVORITE COLOR: Purple
INTERESTS: Music, painting, studying
WISH: To be the best songwriter and DJ on Starland
WHY CHOSEN: Clover has great self-discipline, patience, and willpower. She is creative, responsible, dependable, and extremely loyal.
WATCH OUT FOR: Clover can be hard to read and she is reserved with those she doesn't know. She's afraid to take risks and can be a wisecracker at times.
SCHOOL YEAR: Second
POWER CRYSTAL: Panthera
WISH PENDANT: Barrette



NAME: Adora
BRIGHT DAY: February 14
FAVORITE COLOR: Sky blue
INTERESTS: Science, thinking about the future and how she can make it better
WISH: To be the top fashion designer on Starland
WHY CHOSEN: Adora is clever and popular and cares about the world around her. She's a deep thinker.
WATCH OUT FOR: Adora can have her head in the clouds and be thinking about other things.
SCHOOL YEAR: Third
POWER CRYSTAL: Azurica
WISH PENDANT: Watch



NAME: Piper
BRIGHT DAY: March 4
FAVORITE COLOR: Seafoam green
INTERESTS: Composing poetry and writing in her dream journal
WISH: To become the best version of herself she can possibly be and to share that by writing books
WHY CHOSEN: Piper is giving, kind, and sensitive. She is very intuitive and aware.
WATCH OUT FOR: Piper can be dreamy, absentminded, and wishy-washy. She can also be moody and easily swayed by the opinions of others.
SCHOOL YEAR: Second
POWER CRYSTAL: Dreamalite
WISH PENDANT: Bracelets



NAME: Astra
BRIGHT DAY: April 9
FAVORITE COLOR: Red
INTERESTS: Individual sports
WISH: To be the best athlete on Starland—to win!
WHY CHOSEN: Astra is energetic, brave, clever, and confident. She has boundless energy and is always direct and to the point.
WATCH OUT FOR: Astra is sometimes cocky, self-centered, condescending, and brash.
SCHOOL YEAR: Second
POWER CRYSTAL: Quarrelite
WISH PENDANT: Wristbands



NAME: Tessa
BRIGHT DAY: May 18
FAVORITE COLOR: Emerald green
INTERESTS: Food, flowers, love
WISH: To be successful enough that she can enjoy a life of luxury
WHY CHOSEN: Tessa is warm, charming, affectionate, trustworthy, and dependable. She has incredible drive and commitment.
WATCH OUT FOR: Tessa does not like to be rushed. She can be quite stubborn and often says no. She does not deal well with change and is prone to exaggeration. She can be easily sidetracked.
SCHOOL YEAR: Third
POWER CRYSTAL: Gossamer
WISH PENDANT: Brooch



NAME: Gemma
BRIGHT DAY: June 2
FAVORITE COLOR: Orange
INTERESTS: Sharing her thoughts about almost anything
WISH: To be valued for her opinions on everything
WHY CHOSEN: Gemma is friendly, easygoing, funny, extroverted, and social. She knows a little bit about everything.
WATCH OUT FOR: Gemma talks—a lot—and can be a little too honest sometimes and offend others. She can have a short attention span and can be superficial.
SCHOOL YEAR: First
POWER CRYSTAL: Scatterite
WISH PENDANT: Earrings



NAME: Cassie
BRIGHT DAY: July 6
FAVORITE COLOR: White
INTERESTS: Reading, crafting
WISH: To be more independent and confident and less fearful
WHY CHOSEN: Cassie is extremely imaginative and artistic. She is a voracious reader and is loyal, caring, and a good friend. She is very intuitive.
WATCH OUT FOR: Cassie can be distrustful, jealous, moody, and brooding.
SCHOOL YEAR: First
POWER CRYSTAL: Lunalite
WISH PENDANT: Glasses



NAME: Leona
BRIGHT DAY: August 16
FAVORITE COLOR: Gold
INTERESTS: Acting, performing, dressing up
WISH: To be the most famous pop star on Starland
WHY CHOSEN: Leona is confident, hardworking, generous, open-minded, optimistic, caring, and a strong leader.
WATCH OUT FOR: Leona can be vain, opinionated, selfish, bossy, dramatic, and stubborn and is prone to losing her temper.
SCHOOL YEAR: Third
POWER CRYSTAL: Glisten paw
WISH PENDANT: Cuff



NAME: Vega
BRIGHT DAY: September 1
FAVORITE COLOR: Blue
INTERESTS: Exercising, analyzing, cleaning, solving puzzles
WISH: To be the top student at Starling Academy
WHY CHOSEN: Vega is reliable, observant, organized, and very focused.
WATCH OUT FOR: Vega can be opinionated about everything, and she can be fussy, uptight, critical, arrogant, and easily embarrassed.
SCHOOL YEAR: Second
POWER CRYSTAL: Queezle
WISH PENDANT: Belt



NAME: Libby
BRIGHT DAY: October 12
FAVORITE COLOR: Pink
INTERESTS: Helping others, interior design, art, dancing
WISH: To give everyone what they need—both on Starland and through wish granting on Wishworld
WHY CHOSEN: Libby is generous, articulate, gracious, diplomatic, and kind.
WATCH OUT FOR: Libby can be indecisive and may try too hard to please everyone.
SCHOOL YEAR: First
POWER CRYSTAL: Charmelite
WISH PENDANT: Necklace



NAME: Scarlet
BRIGHT DAY: November 3
FAVORITE COLOR: Black
INTERESTS: Crystal climbing (and other extreme sports), magic, thrill seeking
WISH: To live on Wishworld
WHY CHOSEN: Scarlet is confident, intense, passionate, magnetic, curious, and very brave.
WATCH OUT FOR: Scarlet is a loner and can alienate others by being secretive, arrogant, stubborn, and jealous.
SCHOOL YEAR: Third
POWER CRYSTAL: Ravenstone
WISH PENDANT: Boots



NAME: Sage
BRIGHT DAY: December 1
FAVORITE COLOR: Lavender
INTERESTS: Travel, adventure, telling stories, nature, and philosophy
WISH: To become the best Wish-Granter Starland has ever seen
WHY CHOSEN: Sage is honest, adventurous, curious, optimistic, friendly, and relaxed.
WATCH OUT FOR: Sage has a quick temper! She can also be restless, irresponsible, and too trusting of others' opinions. She may jump to conclusions.
SCHOOL YEAR: First
POWER CRYSTAL: Lavenderite
WISH PENDANT: Necklace


Vega
Vega is a serious student and is very focused on learning all she can. She loves solving puzzles—especially the Starling Academy hedge maze. She's reliable and observant but can sometimes be opinionated and uptight.



BASS



Instrument

Each girl in the Star Darlings band has a unique musical talent that helps her light up the stage.

QUEEZLE



Power Crystal

Once a Star Darling has granted her first wish and returns to Starland, she receives a very special treasure—a beautiful Power Crystal.

BELT



Wish Pendant

A Wish Pendant is a powerful accessory worn by a Star Darling. On Wishworld, it helps her identify her Wisher and stores the ever-important wish energy.




Scarlet
Scarlet is fiercely independent and has tons of confidence. She needs to learn to connect with others while staying true to her rebellious, strong-willed personality.



BOOTS



Wish Pendant

A Wish Pendant is a powerful accessory worn by a Star Darling. On Wishworld, it helps her identify her Wisher and stores the ever-important wish energy.

RAVENSTONE



Power Crystal

Once a Star Darling has granted her first wish and returns to Starland, she receives a very special treasure—a beautiful Power Crystal.



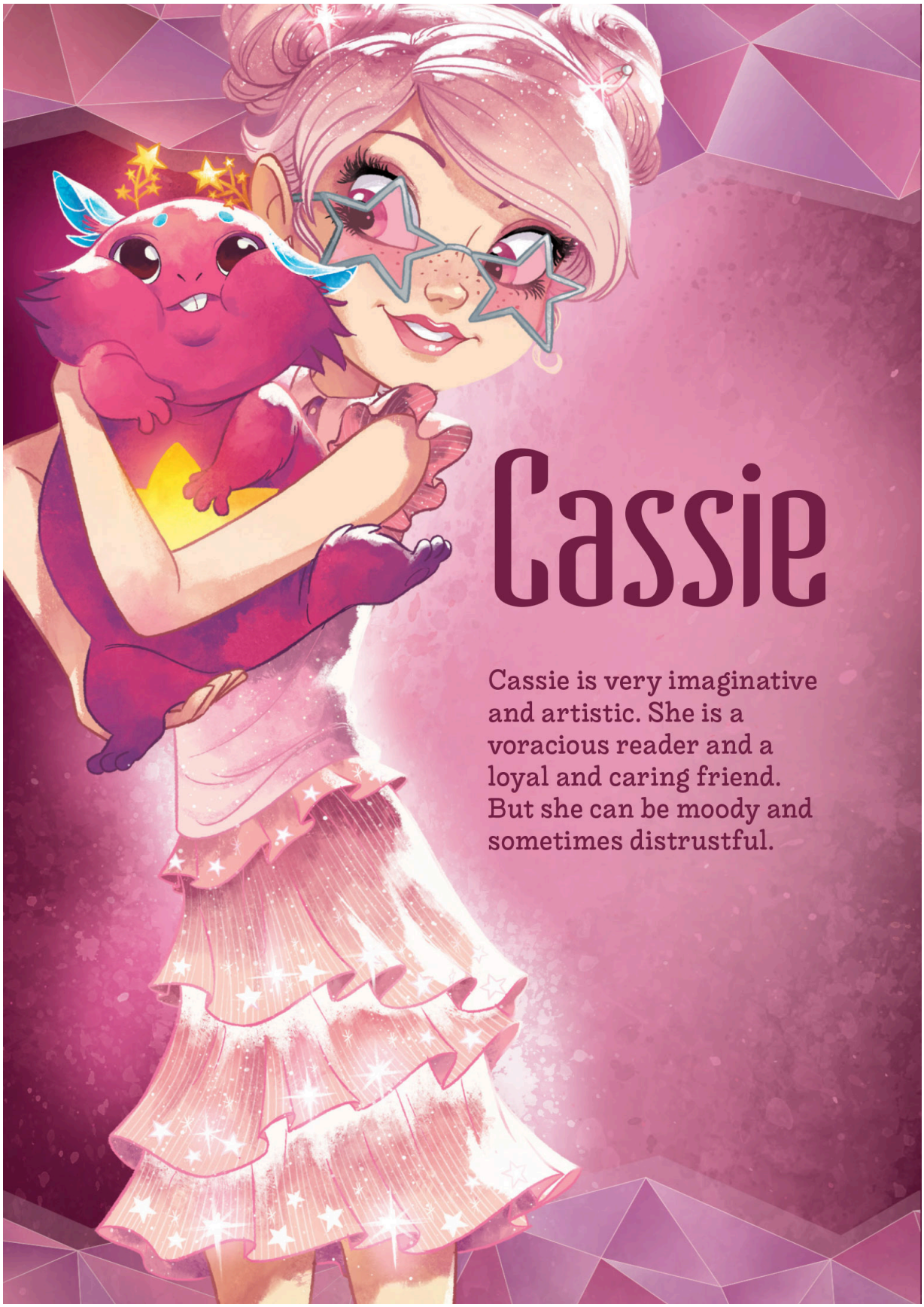
DRUMS



Instrument

Each girl in the Star Darlings band has a unique musical talent that helps her light up the stage.





Cassie

Cassie is very imaginative and artistic. She is a voracious reader and a loyal and caring friend. But she can be moody and sometimes distrustful.



LUNALITE



Power Crystal

Once a Star Darling has granted her first wish and returns to Starland, she receives a very special treasure—a beautiful Power Crystal.

GLASSES



Wish Pendant

A Wish Pendant is a powerful accessory worn by a Star Darling. On Wishworld, it helps her identify her Wisher and stores the ever-important wish energy.



Introduction

You take a deep breath, about to blow out the candles on your birthday cake. Clutching a coin in your fist, you get ready to toss it into the dancing waters of a fountain. You stare at your little brother as you each hold an end of a dried wishbone, about to pull. But what do you do first?

You make a wish, of course!

Ever wonder what happens right after you make that wish? *Not much,* you may be thinking.

Well, you'd be wrong.

Because something quite unexpected happens next. Each and every wish that is made becomes a glowing Wish Orb, invisible to the human eye. This undetectable orb zips through the air and into the heavens, on a one-way trip to the brightest star in the sky—a magnificent place called Starland. Starland is inhabited by Starlings, who look a lot like you and me, except they have a sparkly glow to their skin, and glittery hair in unique colors. And they have one more thing: magical powers. The Starlings use these powers to make good wishes come true, for when good wishes are granted, the result is positive energy. And the Starlings of Starland need this energy to keep their world running.

In case you are wondering, there are three kinds of Wish Orbs:

1) GOOD WISH ORBS. These wishes are positive and helpful and come from the heart. They are pretty and sparkly and are nurtured in climate-controlled Wish-Houses. They bloom into fantastical glowing orbs. When the time is right, they are presented to the appropriate Starling for wish fulfillment.

2) BAD WISH ORBS. These are for selfish, mean-spirited, or negative things. They don't sparkle at all. They are immediately transported to a special containment center, as they are very dangerous and must not be granted.
3) IMPOSSIBLE WISH ORBS. These wishes are for things, like world peace and disease cures, that simply can't be granted by Starlings. These sparkle with an almost impossibly bright light and are taken to a special area of the Wish-House with tinted windows to contain the glare they produce. The hope is that one day they can be turned into good wishes the Starlings can help grant.

Starlings take their wish granting very seriously. There is a special school, called Starling Academy, that accepts only the best and brightest young Starling girls. They study hard for four years, and when they graduate, they are ready to start traveling to Wishworld to help grant wishes. For as long as anyone can remember, only graduates of wish-granting schools have ever been allowed to travel to Wishworld. But things have changed in a very big way.

Read on for the rest of the story….

Vega and the Fashion Disaster

Shana Muldoon Zappa and Ahmet Zappa
with Zelda Rose

Disney Press
Los Angeles • New York



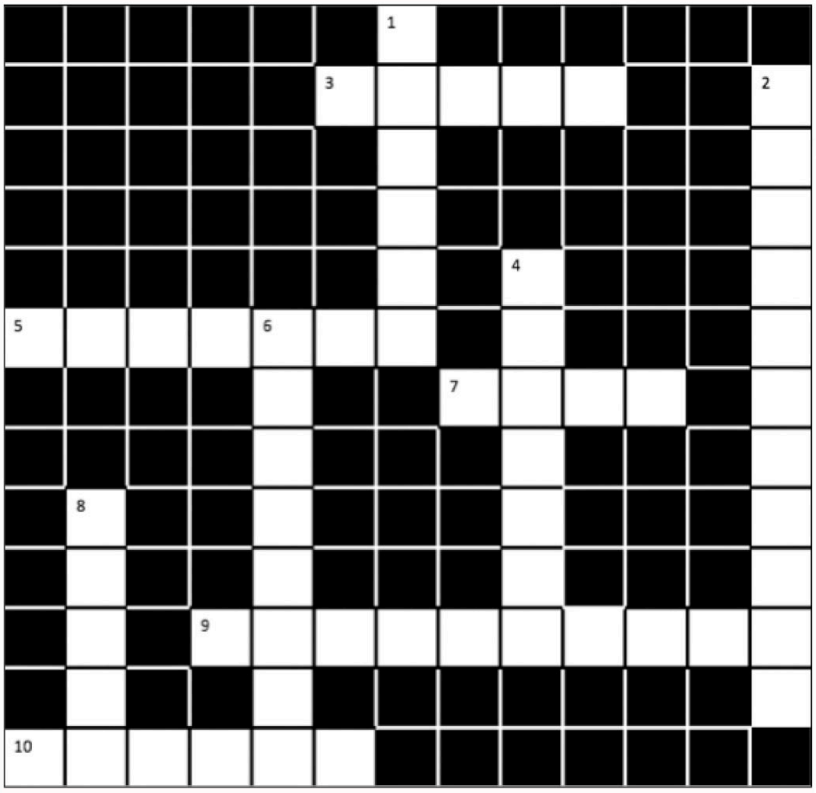
ACROSS:

3. Student who went on second mission and identified the wrong wish at first.
5. 4-Down was replaced by another student, named _____.
7. Student who went on first mission and identified wrong Wisher at first.
9. Headmistress of Starling Academy. She came up with the secret plan to send twelve students to Wishworld to collect wish energy.
10. There were band tryouts, and a machine called the _____ chose the members. It also named the band the Star Darlings. That made 9-Across very upset, as it gave up our secret name.

DOWN:

1. This mean student wanted to be lead singer of the band, but she lost. I don't think we've heard the end of it.
2. The head of admissions. She stutters when nervous and trips a lot. Everyone feels a little sorry for her.
4. It was determined that this student's assignment as a Star Darling was a mistake, and she was replaced.
6. All the Star Darlings who have tasted this Wishworld drink love it.

Answers: 3-A: Libby; 5-A: Ophelia; 7-A: Sage; 9-A: Lady Stella; 10-A: Ranker;
1-D: Vivica; 2-D: Lady Cordial; 4-D: Scarlet; 6-D: Lemonade; 8-D: Leona


1
3
2
4
5
6
7
8
9
10

CHAPTER 1

Vega sat on her neatly made bed, staring at the holo–crossword puzzle projected into the air above her Star-Zap. With two flicks of her wrist, she switched the position of two answers, then frowned and returned them to their original places. She nodded, finally satisfied. It was perfect. Vega loved creating puzzles almost as much as she enjoyed solving them. She appreciated crosswords, riddles, puzzles, brainteasers, mazes, and games—anything that challenged her and made her think in a fun and interesting way.

With another flick of her wrist, she erased all the answers, leaving the clues and a blank grid, ready to be filled in. She took a look at her handiwork and sighed. The real joy in creating a puzzle was sharing it with someone. She wished she could send it to her best friend from home, Enna, who loved games just as much as she. The two girls had even made up a secret holo-alphabet they had both memorized so they could communicate privately. What looked like gibberish to their classmates back at Kaleidoscope Falls Elementary might be a complex message about after-school plans or the guest list for Enna's upcoming Bright Day party.

Sure, Vega belonged to Starling Academy's Puzzle Club, which met after school every Dododay and was filled with like-minded students. It was the first club she had joined since arriving at the school two years before.

But the secret nature of the Star Darlings made this crossword something she could not share with anyone except them. So there were only eleven girls she could share it with, and unfortunately, none of them were particularly interested in brainteasers. In fact, they seemed to think Vega's obsession was a little weird. It had been just a starweek or two earlier that she and Leona had found themselves sitting across from each other at lunchtime in the Celestial Café. After they had ordered their meals from the hovering Bot-Bot waiter, Vega had turned to Leona excitedly and said, "Let's guess whose food will arrive first!" and Leona had just laughed.

"Everything is a game to you, Vega, isn't it?" she said. Vega had blinked at her in surprise. It was—and why not? Games made life more interesting. She didn't get why the other girls didn't understand that. Not that she wasn't serious-minded—quite the contrary: she was as focused on her studies as a Starling could be. But she could make studying into a game, too.

As she recalled the conversation, Vega realized that was one of the last times she had heard Leona laugh. Leona's Wish Mission had been a terrible disappointment. (See 8-Down.) Although she had successfully granted her Wisher's wish, Leona's Wish Pendant had malfunctioned, and when she had returned to Starland, she had discovered it was blackened and burnt-looking. As a result, Leona hadn't collected a single drop of wish energy. The usually vivacious girl had been sad and withdrawn ever since. Lady Stella had done her best to convince her it wasn't her fault, but Leona was set on blaming herself.

Lady Stella told everyone to keep attending class (including their special Star Darlings–only class at the end of each school day), learning their lessons, and going on their Wish Missions as planned. The headmistress would be working with some leading wish energy scientists and some trusted faculty members to figure out what had gone wrong with Leona's Wish Pendant and how to fix it. Hopefully they would figure it out soon.

Vega's bass guitar was in its cerulean case, leaning in the corner of the exceptionally neat bedroom. She imagined that it was looking at her reproachfully, as the Star Darlings band hadn't had a rehearsal in a week because of their lead singer's absence during her Wish Mission. They had one scheduled for that day. Would Leona show up? Vega certainly hoped so. They were already down one member due to Scarlet's ouster from the Star

Darlings (see 4-Down), and Vega feared that the additional loss of their lead singer could mean the end of the group.

Vega glanced down at her Star-Zap. It was nearly time for practice, and she realized she wanted to be on her way there before her roommate got back from Meditation Club. Vega's strong desire to vacate the premises surprised her. She stood up quickly and smoothed the blue coverlet, which was unnecessary, as its edges were pulled so tightly you could bounce a wharfle on it. She knew because she had tried. Vega's roommate, Piper, kept her side of the room just as neat as Vega's, and Vega counted her lucky stars every day for that. But that's where the similarity ended. Piper's side was dreamy and ethereal, with a gently undulating water bed covered with the softest of linens and more pillows than you could count, the largest embroidered with the word *dream*. Her star-painted dresser contained more nightgowns and pajamas than regular clothes; Vega was sure of it. She had not seen her roommate wear the same thing twice to bed.

Vega stole a quick glance at the mirror hanging on her closet door. Neatly bobbed blue hair, smooth and shiny. Electric blue jacket, sparkly tunic, leggings, and soft ankle boots. She was crisp, polished, and neat as a pin, as usual. She grabbed her bass and turned to head out of the room. The door slid open. Too late.

Piper stood in the doorway, blinking at Vega in her usual sleepy fashion. Her seafoam green hair rippled down her back, past her waist. Her long dress billowed around her feet. She was tall and slender, and whenever Vega looked at her, she couldn't help thinking of a graceful, flowing waterfall.

"Hey," said Vega.

"Hello there," said Piper languidly. She smiled slowly and sighed contentedly. "Meditation Club was starmendously relaxing today." She swiveled her head around and shrugged a couple of times. "I feel like a wet noddlenoodle, like I could just collapse in a heap."

"Maybe you need a nap," Vega suggested starcastically.

Piper's light green eyes lit up. "What a great idea!" she said. She sauntered to her side of the room and reached for one of the week's worth of sleeping masks that hung from the wall on pretty pegs before kicking off her slippers, pulling on the mask, and curling up on her chaise lounge. She arranged a loosely knit pale green blanket over her. Within arm's reach of her lounge were a basket of holo-diaries for jotting down dreams and a

large bouquet of glittery coral-colored flowers, which perfumed the room with an almost magical fragrance. Piper inhaled deeply. *"Mmmmmm,"* she said sleepily.

Vega tried as hard as she could not to roll her eyes at her roommate. Not that Piper could see from under the sleeping mask anyway. Who needed to take an after-meditation nap? Wasn't that redundant? But then she immediately felt bad. From day one it had been quite obvious that ethereal Piper and practical Vega were complete opposites. Vega was direct and serious, and she liked rules. Piper was emotional, otherworldly, and unhurried. But they quickly learned that they had a common love of order and that they often saw situations from two very different angles, which gave them a multidimensional view on many issues.

Soon they developed a grudging admiration for each other. It was a struggle sometimes, but they had made it work. But then, as Vega recalled, things had changed dramatically. They had gone to bed planning a hike to the Crystal Mountains, debating what to bring for lunch, and had woken up the next morning scowling at each other. Piper had started relaying the previous night's dream, which apparently had featured Vega in a starring (and not very flattering) role, and Vega had just cut her off. Now relations between the two were chilly, though usually polite. She could tell it pained the sensitive Piper, and it wasn't pleasant for Vega, either. But there didn't seem to be anything they could do to fix it.

Piper raised her eye mask and looked at Vega. "Are you going to band rehearsal?" she asked.

"You're a regular detective," Vega heard herself say, an edge to her voice as she held up her guitar case. Piper gave a thin-lipped smile and pulled the mask back over her eyes.

Immediately feeling guilty for her rudeness, Vega quickly opened the sliding door, walked out, closed it, and stepped onto the dorm's Cosmic Transporter, a moving sidewalk that ran through it.

Unbeknownst to each other, once they were alone, the two girls gave simultaneous sighs of relief.

CHAPTER 2

"No, no, no, no, no," said Leona, stamping her foot so hard her golden earrings jangled. "You've got it all wrong. All wrong!" She dug her hands into her halo of golden curly hair in frustration.

Vega bit her lip, beginning to wish she had skipped rehearsal. From the looks on her fellow band members' faces, she suspected they felt the same way.

Leona turned to the band's lead guitarist. "Sage," she said. "You're playing too slow. This is rehearsal for a rock band, not an End of the Cycle of Life procession, for stars' sake."

Before the girl could respond, Leona turned to Libby. "And *you're* coming in too soon on the keytar," she scolded.

Libby sucked in her cheeks and stared down at the keys on her portable keyboard.

Vega held her breath, hoping she would be spared Leona's wrath. No such luck. Leona spun around and stared at her for a minute before she spoke.

"And, Vega, you were in the wrong key." She leaned her face close to Vega's. "Don't do that again," she concluded.

Vega felt her cheeks turn red. She generally appreciated Leona's big personality and even occasionally found her dramatic outbursts somewhat

entertaining, but that day she felt the girl was just being a big bully.

She watched as Libby took a deep breath, closed her eyes, wiped the frown off her face, and opened her eyes. “Leona,” Libby said kindly, “do you need a break?”

This only served to infuriate Leona further. “I don’t need a break!” she screeched. “I need a new band.”

Clover, who had reluctantly agreed to sub for Scarlet when she hadn’t shown up for the last rehearsal, raised her drumsticks and hit the cymbal with a loud crash. She stood up. “That’s it,” she said. “Guess what, Leona? I don’t need to take this. I’m just doing this as a favor. And now I’m out of here.” She shoved her drumsticks into her back pocket and stormed off.

Leona spun around, throwing her hands into the air. “Great, guys, just great,” she said. “Now we’re drummer-less again. And she wasn’t even the problem. It’s the three of you!”

Libby, Sage, and Vega glanced at each other. Nobody seemed to be in any rush to argue with the enraged diva. Finally, Libby spoke up. “Leona,” she said, putting her hand on the girl’s arm. “We understand that you’re under a lot of stress right now. But you also have to see things from our point of view. We’re learning new songs and we’re trying hard and you need to be patient with us. Nobody is going to want to be in your band if you yell all the time. And I don’t think you want us to quit, do you?”

Vega was impressed. Libby always could see both sides of a situation and lay them out clearly in a nonjudgmental way. And Leona actually seemed to be listening to her.

“Yeah,” Vega added. “You’d have to have tryouts all over again. What if Vivica comes back?”

Vivica was Leona’s biggest rival and was still angry that Leona had beaten her to be lead singer of the group. Starting over would be completely unacceptable. Leona’s shoulders sagged. “You’re right,” she said. “I’m just so upset about everything and I guess I’m taking it out on you guys….” Her voice trailed off.

“Of course you’re upset,” Sage said in a calming tone. “Listen, it’s all going to be okay. We’re a good group! Don’t forget that we were the ones who were picked out of all the students who tried out. Maybe we should just hold off on practicing until you’re feeling better about…” Vega noticed that Sage’s eyes had lit on the empty spot on Leona’s wrist where her Wish Pendant used to be. Once you noticed that, it was almost impossible to look

anywhere else. Vega forced herself to stare at Leona's face. "Um, everything that happened," Sage concluded.

"Okay," said Leona softly. She gazed at the ground, unable to look anyone in the eye. "I'll let you know when I'm feeling more up to it." She smiled sadly. "I'm sorry."

The three girls watched as Leona headed toward the Big Dipper Dorm, the slightly bigger and fancier dorm where all the third and fourth years lived.

Vega turned to the two other girls. "Wow," she said. "Do you think she's ever going to get over what happened?"

"She had better," said Sage, "or she's going to lose all her friends. If she hasn't already." She shrugged. "Well, see you later. I have plans to meet some friends and listen to music at the Lightning Lounge." She turned and hurried off.

"What do you think?" Vega asked Libby. But the pink-haired girl was holo-texting and held up a finger for Vega to hold her thought. Vega did.

"So what do you think about that?" Vega repeated when Libby was finished.

"What do I think? I think we'd better find Scarlet if we want to keep this band together," said Libby. "As much as she and Leona didn't get along, Leona usually behaved around her. And Clover was mad. I don't think she's coming back."

"So no one has seen Scarlet since…that day?" Vega asked.

"Well, Tessa told me that Scarlet stopped showing up for their Astronomics class," said Libby. "It's totally bizarre. Nobody's seen her. And nobody knows where her new dorm room is—or even if she has one." She shook her head. "It's a mystery."

Libby's Star-Zap pinged, telling her she had a holo-text. She read it, smiled, and put her guitar back in its pink case, then snapped the case closed. "Adora's at the Serenity Gardens," she reported, "so I'm going to paddle out there and hang out with her until dinnertime. Want to join me?" Vega declined, even though she enjoyed the gardens, a chain of star-shaped islands connected by footbridges that sat in the middle of Luminous Lake. Lush and beautiful, it was a wild place with towering trees, shady nooks, blossoming shrubs, creeping vines, and more varieties of flowers than you could count. The air smelled tantalizingly delicious. But there was a place she liked even better.

“See you at dinner, then,” said Libby, walking off toward Luminous Lake. Vega knew she’d grab a hovercanoe at the boathouse on Shimmering Shores. Vega slung her own guitar case over her shoulder and headed to the hedge maze, her favorite spot in all of Starling Academy. The trickily curving paths, which led, eventually, to a lovely seating area in the middle, were surrounded on either side by tall green hedges, so you couldn’t see over to the next turn. But this maze was special. Its paths were constantly shifting, so it had limitless possibilities. You never went the same way twice. It was quite challenging. This was delightful to Vega but entirely frustrating and confusing to most of the other students, so Vega knew she would have her privacy. An escape route had recently been added, after a first year had unwisely gone into the hedge maze without her Star-Zap and, unable to find her way out, had to sleep under a hedge overnight. Now a single red florafierce could be found blooming in each wall of the maze. All you had to do was pick it and the maze would immediately form a doorway out. But Vega would never consider using it. Finding her way in an ever-changing maze was too much fun.

Vega could feel all the frustrations of the day magically lift as she stepped between the leafy maze walls. She loved the way the thick hedges towered over her head and framed the blue sky above. She was convinced she did her best thinking as she wandered through its pathways.

She switched on her Star-Zap’s holo-video and began recording. She liked to take holo-vids of her day and review them before she got into bed for the night. After she made the first turn, she had a choice of going left or right. Without hesitation, she took the left path. Turning, and turning, and turning some more, she meandered through until she found herself in the center of the maze, which that day featured a display of lallabelle flowers, formed into a star shape, of course. Nearby was a pretty little swing hung with creeping zeldablooms, fragrant and lush. She sat on it and swung back and forth, the slight breeze ruffling her short hair.

Vega opened her guitar case, lifted the blue embroidered strap over her neck, and began to strum, practicing her scales, starting with C major. Her fingers alternated over the frets as she picked out a sequence of notes. Practicing her scales soothed and calmed her, which was good, because Leona’s outburst during band practice was still bothering her. It wasn’t only that the girl had berated her fellow band members (Vega did not appreciate being yelled at for no good reason), but also that the usually confident

Starling was feeling so downtrodden. Plus, she wondered, if they could even find Scarlet, could they convince her to return to the band? Not if Leona was acting like this; that was for sure. Vega thought there must be something she could do to help. Her fingers playing the notes, she swung back and forth, lost in thought. *That's it! I'll holo-text Cassie!* Cassie had struck up an unlikely but warm friendship with Leona. Unlikely because Cassie was as reserved and shy as Leona was loud and confident. But their opposite-personality friendship worked. Vega felt a twinge of remorse. It was just like how she and Piper used to balance each other out.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out her Star-Zap. I'M IN THE HEDGE MAZE. DO YOU HAVE A MINUTE TO TALK ABOUT LEONA? she holo-texted.

The response was immediate: I'LL BE THERE IN TEN STARMINS.

So Vega continued to play, lost in her thoughts about Leona, Scarlet, and Piper. Glancing at her Star-Zap, which sat nearby, she realized the ten starmins were almost up. She put her bass back in its case and began making her way toward the maze entrance. Then her Star-Zap beeped and flashed a small icon of her mother's face. It was in a red star, a reminder that she had not yet returned her mother's holo-call from two stardays earlier. Vega considered doing it right then and there, but she still wasn't ready. She knew her mom was going to ask her to come home for a visit (again), and Vega needed to come up with a reason that she couldn't (again). She had already used a fellow student's Bright Day celebration she couldn't miss, a Glowin' Glions game, and an extra-credit assignment. She was running out of excuses. Vega felt uneasy. She wasn't exactly sure when things between her and her mom had gotten so complicated, but she figured it must have been around the time the two had seemed to switch roles. Vega had reached the Age of Fulfillment and overnight, it seemed, had transformed from a carefree child to an über-responsible, grades-obsessed perfectionist. She was determined to get into Starling Academy at any cost and had focused all her energy on studying. (She took the entrance examination five times to get the rare perfect score, which she was sure would guarantee her acceptance. Luckily, she loved tests, seeing them as the ultimate game.) And perhaps because her mother, Virginia, realized she no longer needed to worry about her daughter, she changed from a constantly stressed-out single mom into a relaxed, fun-loving person. The two rarely saw eye to eye on anything these days, so Vega alternately missed her mom terribly and was relieved by the distance between them.

Vega turned a corner and spotted Cassie, who looked flustered. She had somehow gotten turned around and was headed the wrong way.

"Hey, Cassie," Vega called.

Cassie spun around, a frown on her pale, pretty face. She was wearing a white diaphanous baby-doll dress shot through with silver thread over a pair of calf-length white leggings and a white tank top. She had delicate silver sandals on her feet.

"Oh, there you are," Cassie said, sounding faintly put out. She blinked up at Vega through her star-shaped glasses, her silvery hair done up in her signature pigtail buns. Vega smiled at the girl.

"Stop it," Cassie snapped.

"Stop what?" Vega asked innocently.

"You're looking at me like I'm some precious little doll," Cassie replied. "You know how much I hate that."

"Sorry," said Vega with an embarrassed grin. She couldn't help it. It was true. Cassie was so tiny and cute, even when she was scowling.

"Well, thank goodness I found you," said Cassie. "You know how this maze drives me crazy."

Vega opened her mouth, about to mention that it was actually *she* who had found Cassie. But the irritated look on Cassie's face told her to keep that thought to herself.

"I'm glad you holo-texted me," Cassie said as the two girls made their way back to the hedge entrance.

They reached a place where they could turn either right or left. Cassie started to go to the right and Vega tapped her on the shoulder. "This way," Vega said, pointing in the opposite direction.

Cassie shrugged. "Whatever you say. You're the expert." She glanced at Vega. "So was Scarlet at practice today?"

Vega shook her head.

Cassie looked disappointed. "So weird," she said. "No one's seen her since that awful day…." Her voice trailed off.

Vega winced, recalling the fear in the pit of her stomach when they all realized Lady Stella was going to tell one of them that she was about to be ousted from the Star Darlings. After all her hard work, it would have been such a blow to her. She had actually frozen with terror at the thought. But as she had looked around the room, she'd realized that each of the eleven other girls felt the same way.

Cassie looked at the ground. “I still feel guilty over how happy I was that it wasn’t me,” she said.

Vega nodded. “I think we all do.”

A sly smile crossed Cassie’s face. “Everyone except Leona,” she said. “I think she was glad to see Scarlet go.” The smile quickly left. “But now Leona’s got her own troubles.” She looked up at Vega. “Is that what you wanted to talk about?”

Vega took a deep breath. “It’s just that Leona’s not herself,” she said. She filled Cassie in on that afternoon’s outburst.

“Oh, that’s bad,” said Cassie, biting her lip. “She loves the band. That’s such a shame.”

Vega put her hands to her forehead. “We should be able to help her get through this. Get everything back to normal. But I have no idea how. That’s where you come in. You two are such good friends.” The thought of losing the band was very upsetting to Vega. She took everything seriously—her classes, her studies, the meals she ate (to give her energy), the time she went to bed (so she’d be well rested for the next day’s classes). Even her beloved games—she was a stickler for following the rules. When she played her bass, it was the only time she ever really let loose and relaxed. She did not want to give that up.

Cassie grimaced. “We *used* to be good friends,” she said. “But she’s been keeping to herself lately. The only person she seems to want to spend time with these stardays is her new roommate, Ophelia.” She thought for a moment, then nodded as if she had made up her mind. “I’m going to try to talk to Leona after dinner,” she said. “Will you come with me?”

“Sure,” said Vega, shrugging.

Cassie’s mood brightened considerably. Vega thought that it was probably both because they had a plan and because they were approaching the end of the maze. Cassie breathed a sigh of relief as they walked out the leafy doorway. The Celestial Café came into sight, and Vega’s stomach rumbled at the same time that the large star above the door began to blink, letting everyone know that it was dinnertime. Perfect. The two girls headed to the building. Inside the large, warmly lit room, soft music was playing. There was the soothing sound of students softly chattering and the clink of silverware against fine china. They headed to the table that had unofficially become the Star Darlings’, with its stunning view of the Crystal Mountains. To the rest of the school, they were a group of girls—four first years, four

second years, and four third years—who attended regular classes but required some extra help during last period. Only the Star Darlings; Lady Stella, the headmistress; Lady Cordial, the head of admissions; and a handful of professors knew who they really were. Vega found that some students treated her differently (a small number of those scornfully, though many were sympathetic), while most didn't seem to care that she was "different." Little did they know that Vega and her fellow Star Darlings were really special in the very best way. That didn't matter to Vega, who didn't really care what others thought of her. It was enough for her to be singled out as special by someone she had admired for a long time: Lady Stella. In the hopes that she would one day be chosen to attend Starling Academy, Vega had devoured every holo-article that had been written about the headmistress.

There were three empty seats at the table, and Cassie and Vega sat next to each other. They missed out on the seats facing the radiant Crystal Mountains, but the light of the setting sun hit the mountain peaks, refracting into stunning mini rainbows that bounced off the shining goblets and illuminated everyone's face.

"So how was Wish Theory class today, Adora?" Vega asked as she unfolded her soft cloth napkin and laid it on her lap. The Star Darlings always made certain to limit their conversations to non–Star Darlings business when they were in eye- and earshot of the rest of the student body. They had been warned countless times that the work they were doing was top secret. Even most of the faculty had no idea what was going on.

"A snore," said Adora with a rueful grin. Professor Illumia Wickes liked to let her students run the class discussions, which was oftentimes wonderful, unless you had an incessant talker in the class. "This girl named Moonaria would not stop talking. No one could get a word in edgewise."

Vega nodded in sympathy. She watched as Tessa entered the cafeteria and, seeing that the only free seat was next to her roommate, Adora, leaned over and whispered in her sister's ear. Gemma rolled her eyes and moved into that seat, leaving the seat next to Leona open for Tessa. Vega noticed that Cassie was openly staring at Leona, who kept leaning over to whisper in Ophelia's ear. Leona was being unusually quiet, and the rest of the girls stole glances at her, as well, used to being entertained by the girl at mealtimes. She would often lead the girls in a sing-along or start a game of holo-telephone. Once the message had started off as "Glow for it! You are

starmendous!" But by the time it got to the end of the line, it had been completely mangled, and poor Cassie had squeaked out, "You've got it! Glowfurs are delicious!" and everyone roared with laughter. Cassie had seemed way more humiliated than she should have been about her mistake, in Vega's opinion. But she had not been able to figure out why.

Astra leaned over. "Why so quiet, Leona?"

Leona simply shook her head. Her expression clearly read *Leave me alone.* Astra looked like she was going to try again, but Cassie elbowed her in the ribs.

"Ouch," said Astra, rubbing her side. She and Leona both had very big personalities. The two usually enjoyed a friendly rivalry, which occasionally resulted in the butting of heads and angry words. But they rarely stayed mad at each other for long. Astra looked confused.

Finally, Cassie leaned over and whispered in Astra's ear. Vega wasn't sure what she had said, but she thought she could guess the gist of it: *Leave Leona alone; she's fragile.* Astra looked disappointed. Whether it was that she felt sorry for Leona or missed her sparring partner, Vega was not sure.

The look on Cassie's face as she watched Leona from across the table was also impossible to decipher—jealous, wistful, or maybe just curious. Next Vega studied Ophelia, who was smiling shyly, her orange-pigtailed head bent to the side to listen to Leona's whispered comments. She seemed like a very nice, quiet girl, and Vega found herself wishing that *she* was the Star Darling who had been assigned the new roommate instead of Leona. The fact that Piper would have to have been expelled from the Star Darlings for that to happen did not escape her, and she silently chided herself for her unkind thoughts.

Vega found her appetite was not diminished by the strange goings-on and polished off her garble-greens soufflé and moon cheese popovers. After the Bot-Bot waiters had cleared the table, she ordered a mug of piping hot Zing and a cocomoon pavlova. The food at Starling Academy was top-notch, and although she wasn't quite as into food as Tessa (who hadn't been able to decide between two desserts, so had ordered both), she appreciated eating well—especially after many nights of popping a premade Sparkle Meal into the oven when her mother was on the overnight shift at the hospital. As a nurse, her hours were long and she couldn't miss a day unless it was an absolute emergency. Vega had learned at a young age what constituted an emergency: not much. She sighed, remembering the many

nights she had eaten alone at the kitchen table while doing her homework. She looked around and smiled. Maybe that's why she felt so fierce about being a Star Darling and keeping everyone together and happy. It was nice to be part of a group, to literally have a place at the table among friends.

After polishing off the last bite of her dessert, Vega swigged the rest of her Zing and stood, pushing her chair back from the table. She was ready to march over to Leona, and she turned to ask Cassie to join her. Cassie grabbed her arm. "Let's wait a minute," she said softly, "and see where Ophelia goes. I'd like to talk to Leona alone." They discreetly followed the two Star Darlings out of the cafeteria. Sure enough, once outside, the two girls parted ways.

After a moment, Leona noticed their presence and gave them a wan smile. "Hello, girls," she said.

Cassie leaned forward for a closer look at Leona. "Did you take your sparkle shower today?" she asked in a concerned voice. Vega blinked, suddenly realizing that Leona's skin was not quite as glittery as usual. She once again wished she was as observant as Cassie, who never seemed to miss a detail. All Starlings had a shimmery glow, and they supplemented it with daily bathing in a shower of weightless sparkles. It was a great way to start the day, as it revitalized and invigorated you, improving your mood and outlook and also refreshing your sparkle. Some Starlings took them twice a day, but Vega felt that was a bit excessive and a daily shower was perfect. It was funny: Leona, with her golden hair, coloring, and clothing, always managed to look extra glittery. But not that night.

"Of course," said Leona. Then she paused and wrinkled her brow, thinking about it. "I mean, I think so. Maybe," she concluded.

Cassie gave Vega a despairing look. Leona was usually vain about her appearance. This was so unlike her.

The Cosmic Transporter dropped them off between the two dorms. The first and second years lived in the Little Dipper Dorm, and the third and fourth years lived in the Big Dipper Dorm. Cassie clearly wanted Leona to invite them to her room, but the girl was not cooperating. She looked at them quizzically as they shifted their feet. "Well, I'll see you la—" Leona started.

"Hey, mind if we drop by?" Cassie interrupted. "I haven't been over in a while."

Leona shrugged halfheartedly. "Sure," she said.

They walked through the doors and stepped onto the Cosmic Transporter that looped its way through the large dormitory, dropping students off in front of their doors. They headed to her room in a silence that seemed awkward to Vega. She and Cassie weren't used to having to carry a conversation when Leona was around. The transporter deposited the three in front of Leona's door, and she placed her hand on the scanner. The simple gesture seemed to take considerable effort. "Welcome, Leona," the soothing Bot-Bot voice said, and the scanner glowed bright blue as the door slid open. The girls stepped inside behind her.

"It's a little messy," Leona said awkwardly. "I've been kind of, um, busy lately."

A little! That was the understatement of the starcentury. Vega was shocked by the state of the room. Offices, dorm rooms, public spaces, houses, classrooms, restaurants, stores—every space on Starland—were self-cleaning. Scrubbing, scouring, mopping, sweeping, vacuuming, and washing were unheard of on Starland, which was why Wishling tools such as mops, brooms, pails, cleansers, sponges, and, most of all, the frighteningly loud contraptions Wishlings called vacuums completely confused Starlings. But Starlings weren't entirely off the hook when it came to cleanliness: they still had to hang their clothes, place their holo-books on the shelves, and throw their garbage into the vanishing garbage cans. Leona had clearly not tidied up in a while. Vega shuddered with distaste as she took in the clothing draped over chairs, the burned-out lightbulb in Leona's three-sided vanity mirror, the pile of jujufruit peels on the floor. Her large round pedestal bed was unmade. Gliony, Leona's stuffed talking lion who never said the same affirmation twice, sat forlornly on the floor, on his head. Cassie picked him up and righted him. "Shine on, bright Starling," he said. Cassie placed him on Leona's shelf and patted his mane.

Vega looked around the room. Leona's stage, a golden star-shaped platform used for her daily performance, was littered with star-shaped stuffed creatures, pillows, and holo-magazines. The disco ball, which usually spun, filling the room with dancing stars of light, was turned off. The trunk she used to store her glamorous golden costumes was empty, its contents strewn about on the floor. The sheer messiness of Leona's side made the contrast with the other side of the room even more shocking. Leona's untidy half was giving Vega a headache, but she was shocked to see that Ophelia didn't seem to have anything *to* organize. Her side was just…

sad. There was a plain solar-metal bed with a simple white moonfeather comforter. The tiny chest of drawers made it clear she didn't have a lot of clothing, either. The lone spot of color on Ophelia's side of the room was a thin orange ribbon that trimmed her plain white bedding.

"Your roommate doesn't have a lot of belongings, does she?" Vega observed.

"No, she doesn't," said Leona with a hint of defensiveness. "She likes to keep things simple."

"Not a holo-book or a holo-photo?" Cassie pressed. "Not a single stuffed creature?" It was clear she was trying to keep her tone light, but Vega could see that Leona was starting to bristle at the questions. To Vega's surprise, the usually sensitive Cassie plowed on. She picked up a tiny crystal that sat on Ophelia's dresser and placed it in her palm. It was a miniature version of the beautiful crystal her own roommate, Sage, displayed in their dorm room, which she had received as a Bright Day gift.

"So tiny!" she marveled. "More like a chip than an actual crystal…"

"Put that down!" Leona snapped.

Cassie's eyes widened and she set it back on the dresser like it was burning her hand. She stared down at her silver slippers, looking like she might cry. Then she seemed to gather herself, taking a deep breath and sitting next to Leona on the rumpled bed. She launched into more questions.

"So what's your new roommate like?" Cassie asked. "Where did she come from? How did a first year get assigned to a third year, anyhow?"

Vega was staring at Cassie, willing her to slow down, but the girl was just getting started.

"You have to admit that it's a little weird that she doesn't have any belongings," Cassie added. "Where's her desk? Her bookcase? Her shelves?"

Leona stood up. "Did you come here to interrogate me about Ophelia?" she asked angrily. "Well, here's a star flash: I think she's great. She's sweet and the perfect roommate. Especially after that Scarlet," she spat out. "I'm so glad not to have to look at *her* weird stuff anymore."

"Leona, we were just—" Vega started.

"Ophelia's going to be back from the library soon, so why don't you just ask her yourself?" Leona interrupted. There was a grin on her face, but it looked angry and mocking. "Or better yet, why don't you just leave us both alone?"

“Sorry to have bothered you,” Cassie muttered, jumping up from the bed. Vega followed her to the door, which Leona slid open with her wish energy manipulation skills. *She’s good,* thought Vega. *Almost as good as I am.* Vega hurried into the hall, relieved to be out of the tense room. She felt lighter just standing in the hallway.

“Why are you bothering me, anyway?” Leona called after them. “You’re just as annoying as Scarlet.”

Cassie spun around so quickly that she knocked into Vega, who had to shoot out a hand and brace it against the wall to steady herself.

“Wait, you saw Scarlet?” they both cried.

But the door slid shut behind them with an angry bang.

CHAPTER 3

"Well, that didn't go very well," said Vega as the two girls, looking dejected, stood on the Cosmic Transporter on the way back to their dormitory.

After Leona kicked them out, they had stood there for a moment, wondering if they should knock and try to explain themselves. The door had slid open and they had smiled, eager to make amends. But Leona stuck her head out and said, "This isn't for you. Our scanner isn't working right and I have to leave it open for Ophelia in case I fall asleep before she gets back." She withdrew her head, then stuck it out again. "It's time for you to go."

Cassie had opened her mouth to reply, but Vega had stepped onto the Cosmic Transporter, pulling Cassie along with her. Enough was enough. Now Vega looked down at the smaller girl, who was frowning. "That must have been really hard for you," she told Cassie sympathetically. "You two were starting to become such good friends."

Cassie shrugged as if it didn't matter, but Vega was pretty sure she was still smarting. The girl's soft burgundy eyes flashed behind her large star-shaped glasses. "Well, at least now we know that Scarlet is still on campus!" she said. "I was afraid that she left the school."

Vega nodded. "We need to find her and see how she's doing." *And,* she added to herself, *convince her to rejoin the band.*

“Exactly!” said Cassie. “She needs to know that we’re still her friends even if she isn’t”—she lowered her voice—“officially one of us.”

“I’ll tell you one thing, though,” Vega said thoughtfully, leaning on the railing. “Leona gets along really well with Ophelia, which is more than I can say for Piper and me these days, that’s for sure.” She turned to Cassie. “Hey, are you and Sage still bickering?”

Cassie opened her mouth to speak, then shut it.

“I said, are you and Sage still bickering?” Vega repeated.

Cassie’s brow was furrowed. “I heard you the first time,” she said. “And it just started me thinking….” She looked down at her silver slippers, deep in thought, then lifted her head. “No,” she said. “We’ve actually been getting along great. Ever since…”

“Ever since what?” Vega asked.

Cassie was nodding to herself. “That’s so weird. I just realized the oddest thing. Sage and I have been getting along great ever since I got rid of that vase of flowers.”

Vega made a face. “You mean those gorgeous coral flowers we all got? You got rid of them? Why would you do that? They’re so pretty and they smell so good!”

Cassie tilted her head to the side. “They *were* pretty,” she said. “And they did smell great.” She paused for a moment to collect her thoughts. “And I can’t really explain it, but I had this weird feeling about them. So one day I just threw them away. Sage was really mad at me at first and tried to get them back, but they had already vanished.” Vega nodded. Once you put your refuse into a garbage can on Starland, it disappeared. Forever. “But she got over it amazingly quickly and we had a good laugh about it. And we’ve…we’ve gotten along ever since! How funny that I just put that together.”

Vega barked out a laugh. “Oh, Cassie,” she said. “Not to be rude or anything, but you have to admit that sometimes your hunches are totally wrong.”

Cassie looked like she was about to argue, so Vega began to list examples. “Remember when you were convinced that the Bot-Bot waiter served you breakfast for dinner one night because it was mad at you, but it really just needed to be retuned?”

Cassie bit her lip. “Yeah,” she said.

"Or when you thought that Lady Rancora stole your Star-Zap when it was obvious that she picked up the wrong one by accident?"

Cassie blushed. "Oh, you're right. I did act a little crazy then." Her determination returned. "But this time I'm pretty sure I'm on to something."

"I'm just saying that sometimes what seems like a hunch is just you being overly sensitive about things," Vega concluded. "And I just find it hard to believe that those gorgeous flowers we all got have some sort of power to make roommates argue with each other. Think about it. What would be the point? It's ridiculous!"

Cassie frowned. "I know it *sounds* strange," she said. "But I can't dismiss the fact that everything between us was better afterwards." She frowned. "But Leona and Ophelia are getting along great, right? I mean, she couldn't have stuck up for her any more than she did. And I know Leona had those flowers in her room. I saw them when they first got them…." Her voice trailed off.

"That's true," said Vega. "So we're forgetting about that crazy idea?"

"Actually…" Cassie said with a frown, "I don't remember seeing any flowers in their room just now. Do you?"

Vega laughed. "I'm sure they had flowers, just like all of us." She thought for a moment. "In fact, I remember Scarlet complaining that they weren't black. Here, I'll prove it." She whipped out her Star-Zap and accessed the video album.

Cassie gave a low whistle. "Really, Vega? You holo-videoed the room? That's just weird."

Vega shrugged. "I holo-vid lots of things!" She turned it on and Cassie leaned over her shoulder to watch. She saw the strange room—half-messy, half-empty—come into view as the holo-camera scanned it and its contents (or lack thereof). Sure enough, the flowers were nowhere to be seen.

"See? No flowers," Cassie said triumphantly.

"I just can't believe that you think a vase of flowers could possibly make people not get along. It seems like a really big leap to take," said Vega.

Cassie stamped her foot. "I don't know why you can't see it! Sage and I and Leona and Ophelia are all getting along, and no one else is. It's so clear!"

Cassie certainly has a temper! thought Vega as they stepped off the Cosmic Transporter, pushed open the door to the dorm, and stepped outside.

It was funny: the girl had been super shy at first, but when Cassie got to know someone, her true self certainly started to come out. They were greeted by the always soothing sound of the bloombugs' evening chorus. Cassie seemed to relax, for which Vega was grateful. Then came the sounds of students returning home for the evening; they chatted and laughed, their voices low and their bellies no doubt pleasantly full. The two girls paused for a moment between the dorm buildings, not quite ready to go inside the Little Dipper Dormitory. Vega squinted. "I think I see your roommate," she said. "Hey, what's that in the air following her?"

Cassie looked into the distance and grinned. "That's a Bot-Bot guide," she said. "MO-J4 to be precise. He has been following Sage everywhere, ever since she got back from her mission."

Vega guffawed. "I thought we weren't allowed to have pets on campus. That's grounds for automatic dismissal!"

Cassie' alabaster face grew even more pale, which seemed impossible to Vega. "It is?" she said worriedly.

"I was just joking," said Vega. "It is forbidden, of course, but the Student Handbook does not specifically mention automatic dismissal."

Cassie looked relieved.

Vega shook her head. "But Bot-Bots are like, neutral. No emotions, you know? They certainly don't play favorites. They're supposed to help us all equally."

Cassie shrugged. "Well nobody told that to Mojo."

"Mojo?" said Vega. She gave Cassie a puzzled look.

"That's what he likes to be called," Cassie explained.

"*Likes* to be called?" Vega shook her head. This was highly irregular. "I don't get it," she said.

"Well, maybe it's because we're the Star Darlings," Cassie said with a shrug. "We're special."

But that didn't make sense to Vega. If MO-J4 was a special Star Darlings Bot-Bot, wouldn't he be following them all around? This was highly irregular and Vega didn't like it one bit. She shook her head as if to clear it and tipped it back to look at the stars which had just started to stud the darkening sky. Staring into the heavens always calmed her, and she brightened with an idea.

"Let's make a bet," she said to Cassie.

Cassie chuckled. “You and your games,” she said, but her voice was kind. Perhaps the stars had settled her, as well.

“I just remembered that we have a botany lab on campus,” said Vega.

“We do,” agreed Cassie.

“So who better to tell us if there really is something odd about the flowers?” Vega asked.

Cassie nodded. “That’s a great idea!”

Vega had a plan. “We can bring them in and leave them for observation,” she suggested. “We won’t say a word about them, just see what they can tell us. But here’s the bet. If I’m right and they are simply ordinary flowers, you have to do a puzzle with me every starday for a double starweek.”

Cassie sighed, but she was smiling. “Fine,” she said. “But if *I’m* right and there’s something wrong with the flowers, you have to help me with my Astral Accounting test. I’m just not absorbing the lessons the way I want to.”

Vega would have helped Cassie with her Astral Accounting anyway (she adored numbers), but she simply said, “It’s a deal.” The two girls pressed their foreheads together, the traditional Starling way of sealing a deal.

Vega smiled. She knew that Cassie’s imagination was getting away with her. The flowers would turn out to be normal, just as she thought, and she’d be able to share her rebuses and crossword puzzles with a friend for sixteen whole stardays. It was a win-win situation. They’d find Scarlet, and Leona would eventually return to her usual jovial self. Everything was going to be okay.

The two tore themselves away from the brilliant night sky and headed inside to the Cosmic Transporter, which would take them to their respective rooms.

“Good night,” said Vega, who was dropped off first.

“Good night,” said Cassie with a yawn. “I’ll pick you—and the flowers—up in the morning before breakfast.”

“See you tomorrow,” said Vega. She placed her hand on the scanner and stepped inside. She checked the time on her Star-Zap. She’d be able to replay the day’s lessons and listen to them twice before bed. Most students just listened to theirs at night as they slept. But Vega didn’t like to take any chances. She wanted to graduate with top honors, and she’d do anything to make it happen. She put on her pajamas, sparkled her face, and brushed her

teeth with her toothlight, then settled into bed with her earphones on. Piper, as usual, was already asleep.



Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding!

Cassie put her hand over the small bell that sat on the botany lab's front desk, to put an end to Vega's incessant ringing. The laboratory was located on the top floor of Halo Hall's science stellation, where the scientific departments and classrooms were located, and sunlight streamed through the glass roof, causing the two girls to squint at each other.

"That's enough, Vega!" Cassie said.

"Well, where are they?" Vega asked. She placed the flowers on the desk. "We're going to miss breakfast. It's the most important meal of the day, you know." Although she was feeling quite impatient, she glanced around at the hydrongs of varieties of plants that filled the room. The botany lab boasted that it had a sample of every plant that grew on Starland, as well as several varieties that Starlings had brought back from trips to Wishworld, and it certainly appeared to be true. The air in the laboratory was moist and warm —pleasantly so, Vega thought—and the many blossoms perfumed the air with an intoxicating scent.

Vega spotted an interesting-looking specimen sitting on a shelf nearby. It was a short, squat, chubby plant and it looked tantalizingly fuzzy. *Go ahead, touch me,* it seemed to be saying. She reached out a finger toward the plant….

"Careful!" someone said.

Vega jumped back and turned around. A woman in a white lab coat stood behind her, a blue holo–name tag pinned to her chest. Vega leaned forward and read it: GLADIOLUS ROSE, BOTANY LAB ASSISTANT.

"I'm Gladiolus Rose, botany lab assistant," she said unnecessarily. "Didn't mean to startle you," she added in an apologetic tone. "But I'd be careful if I were you. That's a cactus from Wishworld."

"What's a cactus?" asked Vega.

"Cactus plants are quite interesting, because they don't need much water. And they're very protective of themselves!" She laughed, waggling her bandaged fingers at Vega. "I learned the hard way. Those soft-looking hairs are really pointy little spikes that can get stuck in your skin!"

Vega backed away. “Thanks for the warning!” she said.

“Sorry for keeping you waiting,” Gladiolus said. “I’m the only one on duty right now. Everyone else is attending a morning meeting, so I’m in charge of the lab at the moment. How can I help you?”

Vega lifted the vase of flowers off the desk. “We received these flowers as a gift. We don’t recognize them and we were wondering if you could help us identify them,” she said.

Gladiolus immediately looked intrigued. She reached for the vase and lifted it from Vega’s hands. She studied the coral blossoms closely. “So interesting! They have the coloring of a roxylinda, but the flower is similar to a calliope,” she said. She held up a single bloom. “But the leaves are more like those found on a violina. It’s very intriguing! I don’t think I’ve seen anything like this before. Perhaps it’s some kind of new hybrid.” She shook her head. “Of course,” she added, “I’m still an assistant, so maybe one of the botanists will have a better idea of what these are. Can you leave them with us?”

“Yes,” Vega and Cassie answered in unison.

Gladiolus leaned over and took a deep sniff. “I just can’t stop smelling them. The scent is so similar to my favorite flower, the callistola, but they look nothing like them.”

“Really?” said Cassie in disbelief. “I think they smell just like—”

Vega gave Cassie a gentle kick to stop her from talking. “I guess we’ll be going now,” she said. “We’ll be in touch.” She didn’t want Cassie to give the assistant botanist any clues about the flowers.

Gladiolus smiled. “Startastic. This will be a fun challenge.” She nodded, still staring at the flowers. “I’m…I’m almost compelled to keep sniffing them. It must be part of their makeup to attract insects to pollinate them. But how strange that it affects Starlings so strongly, as well! So interesting! Star salutations for bringing these in!”

The two girls said good-bye and left the lab. They broke into a jog when they realized how late it was, and raced each other to the Celestial Café. Most of their fellow Star Darlings had already finished their breakfast and set off for class. Only Clover remained, finishing a bowl of Sparkle-O’s. The two girls placed a quick order with their hovering Bot-Bot waiter and soon received their astromuffins and glorange juice in to-go cups. They thanked the waiter.

“I wish you girls had time for a real meal,” the Bot-Bot waiter said sadly, and they assured him they would make time for a proper breakfast the following morning. They munched their muffins on the way to class.

“So what class do you have now?” Vega asked before taking a long swig of juice.

“Wish Fulfillment,” said Cassie with a smile. Professor Eugenia Bright was a captivating teacher and routinely won top honors as Starling Academy’s favorite professor.

“Lucky,” said Vega. “I have Wish Identification.”

“With Professor Lucretia Delphinus?” asked Cassie. “Then you have my sympathies.”

Tiny and tough, Professor Lucretia Delphinus was an inspiring teacher, but her temper could be mercurial. When she was in a happy mood, her class was a dream and Vega didn’t want it to end. But if she was feeling cranky, everyone needed to watch out. On those days, Vega would sit through the whole class willing time to fly and trying hard not to steal glances at her Star-Zap to check on its progress. Once, Professor Lucretia Delphinus caught a student surreptitiously checking her Star-Zap, and she grabbed it from the girl and read the offending holo-text out loud. Most unfortunately, it had said DO YOU HAVE GOOD PLD OR BAD PLD FOR CLASS TODAY?

The girl had tried to explain that *PLD* stood for *Positive Light Definition*, but PLD herself would have none of it. There had been detention as a result—for everyone.

“I can’t wait to find out what’s going on with the flowers!” said Cassie excitedly, changing the subject. “The wait is going to kill me.”

“Me too,” said Vega teasingly. “I can’t wait to discover that they’re just ordinary flowers and that you’ll be playing games with me all double starweek!”

Cassie shook her head. “Didn’t you hear what she said? She’d never seen anything like them before!”

“Only because she’s still an assistant,” said Vega. “As soon as one of the real botanists takes a look, they’ll identify them in no time.”

Cassie shrugged. “I guess time will tell,” she said. “How long do you think it will take? I wonder if we’ll hear from them tomorrow. Do you th…” Her voice trailed off. “Vega? Vega, are you even listening to me?”

But Vega had just spotted a flash of pink and black ahead and wasn't listening at all. She grabbed Cassie's arm, dropping her half-eaten muffin. It fell to the floor unnoticed and was promptly squashed by a foot clad in a shiny bright-yellow shoe.

"Scarlet!" she managed to say. "I think I see Scarlet!"

Cassie's eyes lit up. "Where?" she asked eagerly.

"Up ahead!" Vega grabbed Cassie's hand, marveling briefly at how cold it was, and dragged her through the crowd, elbowing students out of her way in her excitement.

"Watch it!" said a fourth year with purple braids, turning around with a scowl.

"What's your hurry?" asked another as Vega accidentally knocked into her. "So rude!"

Cassie ducked under another girl's elbow as Vega spotted her target—a girl in a black miniskirt, pink-and-black-striped leggings, and a matching hoodie pulled over her head. Vega reached out and grabbed the girl's arm before she could disappear.

The girl spun around and smiled pleasantly at the two. "Hey, can I help you?" she asked, pulling down the hood and exposing her pale pink curls.

Vega felt the sinking feeling of disappointment in her stomach. "Starscuse me," she mumbled. "I thought you were someone else."

The girl nodded and turned away.

Cassie gave a strangled laugh. "She was much friendlier than Scarlet, anyway."

Vega grinned despite herself. "You're right."

The two girls stared at each other for a moment. Vega shrugged. "Oh, well," she said. "Here I am." She was standing right in front of her Wish Identification classroom. "See you last period," she told Cassie, and turned to go into the classroom.

"See you last period," said Cassie. Vega saw her own look of disappointment mirrored in the girl's expression.



"Vega! Starland to Vega!" someone said with exasperation.

Vega sat up straight with a start. She suddenly realized that every Starling in class was staring at her. The formidable professor was standing

right in front of her, snapping her fingers in her face. *Oh, starf.*

"I'm sorry," she told the teacher, who was looking at her expectantly. "Can you repeat the question?"

Professor Lucretia Delphinus looked disappointed. "My most ardent student not paying attention," she said with a sigh. "And here I was, thinking that my lesson was particularly interesting today!"

Vega was deeply embarrassed and felt her cheeks flush hot and sparkly. She hated disappointing her teacher and being called out in front of the other students. She could imagine what they'd say: *See, she's one of those remedial class girls who don't belong. I knew she wasn't so smart after all!* But she had been mulling over the events of the past two days and had zoned out.

"I asked, 'Are you paying attention?'" Professor Lucretia Delphinus said with a smirk. "I guess I know what my answer is."

Half the class tittered, relieved that they weren't the ones caught in the starlight. The other half winced in sympathy.

"Sorry," said Vega.

"Not as sorry as I am," said Professor Lucretia Delphinus, which, as intended, made Vega feel even worse.



Vega was relieved to head to "remedial class" at the end of the day. She always felt much more relaxed when she was surrounded by her fellow Star Darlings. She settled herself in her chair, set her Star-Zap just so in the corner of her desk, and switched it on to begin recording so she wouldn't miss a word the teacher had to say when she arrived. Vega recorded everything, including the teacher's greeting and farewell, and appended her own thoughts to the recording. If a fellow student ever missed class, she always went to Vega, because Vega took the best and most thorough notes in the school.

The door slid open and the teacher stepped inside. Vega's heart sank. Was this a joke? That day's visiting lecturer was none other than Professor Lucretia Delphinus herself!

"Greetings, students," she said as she walked into the classroom briskly. The Star Darlings sat up straight and silenced themselves immediately. She smiled when she saw Vega giving her a sheepish look. "Vega! All has been

forgiven," she said. "We start anew right now." Vega smiled back tentatively.

The professor sauntered down the aisle and paused at Vega's desk. "I'm only hard on you Star Darlings because I expect great things from you," she explained.

Vega nodded, relieved.

"Today we are going to concentrate on wish identification," she said. "This is the most difficult part of the wish-granting process." She looked around the room. "Why is that?" she asked.

Vega's hand shot up. She was eager to impress.

"Yes, Vega?"

"Because we don't receive a firm indication of when a wish is identified, the way we do when the Wisher is first identified. It can be different for everyone. Starlings have to rely on their gut feeling because they have no indication they are on the right track at all."

The professor nodded. Then someone caught her eye. "Ah, a new student," the teacher said. "What is your name?"

"Ophelia," the Starling answered, her cheeks flushed and sparkled.

"We'll start off with an easy question for you, Ophelia. How do you know when you have identified the correct Wisher?"

Ophelia looked panicked. "I…um…uh…" Shamefaced, she stared down at her desk. "I…uh…can't remember."

"Tsk, tsk, tsk," said the tiny teacher. "This is the difference between a successful mission and coming back from Wishworld with an empty Wish Pendant."

With a strangled sound, Leona stood up and ran out of the room.

Professor Lucretia Delphinus looked surprised. "Was it something I said?" she asked. She shrugged. "Vega, can you help Ophelia out?"

Vega could and did. She sat back in her seat, happy to have redeemed herself. After class, she got an approving nod from the professor, and she left the room with a bounce in her step. Cassie caught up with her, her cheeks pink from exertion. After surreptitiously glancing around to make sure that Ophelia was not in earshot, she spoke.

"Excuse me?" asked Vega. She bent down closer to Cassie to hear better.

"Did you see that?" Cassie asked in a hushed voice. "It's so obvious that Ophelia shouldn't be here. I wish we could find Scarlet and tell her that!"

Vega shook her head. “Just because she’s slow to catch on doesn’t necessarily mean she’s not Star Darlings material,” she said. “But it would be great to find Scarlet and see if she knows why she was kicked out. I’m sure there’s a perfectly rational explanation.”

“If you say so,” said Cassie. But to Vega, she did not look convinced one bit.



It was pretty clear that Cassie was not a morning person. Vega, on the other hand, was. She almost burst into laughter when she knocked softly on Cassie’s door (so as not to disturb the still-sleeping Sage) bright and early the next morning and the girl emerged from her room. Vega looked as crisp and neat as usual, wearing a blue tunic and footless tights, her usual serenely sophisticated style. Cassie, who tended to prefer dainty comfort in her outfits, walked out of the room with a scowl on her face, her pigtail buns askew, her dress tucked into her leggings, and two different silvery shoes on her feet. Vega untucked the girl’s dress for her and pointed to her feet. Cassie glanced down, groaned, and returned to the room to find a matching pair of shoes.

But Cassie’s grumpy expression began to relax as soon as they stepped outside into the early-morning starshine. They were headed to the botany lab to check on the flowers.

“Don’t you think it’s weird that we haven’t heard from them yet?” Cassie asked as they boarded the Cosmic Transporter. Vega shortened her step a bit to match Cassie’s stride.

“Maybe they’re busy,” suggested Vega. “Our flowers probably aren’t too high on their priority list.”

“Well, they should be,” said Cassie grumpily. They exited the Cosmic Transporter in front of Halo Hall and walked up the white marble stairs.

When they reached the warm, moist lab, Cassie lunged forward and gave the bell a single polite ding before Vega could get her hands on it. A vase of crimsonalias sat on the desk nearby. Cassie gave Vega a look. *Don’t even think about ringing that bell,* her expression seemed to say.

Gladiolus Rose strolled through a doorway, wiping her hands on her white lab coat. “Hello,” she said. “How can I help you?”

Cassie gave Vega a glance. Didn't the assistant recognize them? It was almost as if she was meeting them for the first time.

"We, um, were just checking up on the flowers we dropped off the other day," Vega explained.

The woman looked behind her and lowered her voice. "I haven't shown them to anyone yet," she said. "The person I wanted to show them to, Professor Peony, has been in a terrible mood lately, so I didn't dare approach her."

"Gladiolus!" someone called out in a peevish tone.

Gladiolus rolled her eyes and began rearranging the bright red crimsonalias. "That's her," she said. "Looks like today isn't going to be any better." She leaned forward. "Listen, I'll try to show the flowers to her later today if I can. I promise!"

"Gladiolus!" Professor Peony called again, a rising note of annoyance in her voice.

"Coming!" Gladiolus called back loudly. She looked down at her hands and realized she had snapped one of the crimsonalia branches in two. "My stars," she said. "Look, I've got to go. Why don't you come back in a couple of stardays, and I'll hopefully have an answer for you by then."

The two girls sighed. "Fine," said Cassie. As soon as Gladiolus left the room, Cassie whirled around to face Vega. "Did you hear that? They're arguing!"

Vega shook her head. "All I heard was one impatient professor. Hold your galliopes."

"Fine," said Cassie with a shrug. "We'll find out soon enough." She rubbed her hands together. "I can't wait till I'm proven right."

"Time will tell," said Vega. "You might just be joining me for sixteen straight stardays of puzzles."

"Oh, boy," said Cassie, feigning excitement.

"That's the spirit," said Vega with a grin.

They walked to the Celestial Café. The light wasn't flashing yet, so they settled themselves on the steps, which were cool, still holding a bit of the chill from the previous evening. Just then, Leona and Ophelia walked by, arm in arm. Cassie stiffened. Then she sighed. "I just miss my friend," she said. "And I'm worried about Scarlet. I wish things could go back to the way they used to be."

Vega laid a hand on Cassie's arm. "Everything is going to be okay," she said. She just hoped she was right.

The Star Darlings were quieter than usual that morning at breakfast. They all seemed to have a lot on their minds. But the air of melancholy didn't do anything to affect Vega's appetite. She quickly polished off her order of starcakes and was wiping her chin with her napkin, about to starscuse herself from the table, when there was a muted buzzing noise, like a swarm of happy glitterbees discovering a bluebeezel garden.

Twenty-four eyes widened and twelve hands reached out to grab their Star-Zaps in unison.

S.D. WISH ORB IDENTIFIED. PROCEED TO LADY STELLA'S OFFICE IMMEDIATELY.

From the other side of the table, there was an excited yelp, which was quickly hushed. Adrenaline coursed through Vega's veins, and it took all her will to keep herself from jumping out of her seat and running as fast as her legs would carry her to Lady Stella's office. That wasn't allowed. She breathed in and out deeply several times to maintain her focus. The other Star Darlings were also admirably composed. Either alone or in pairs, the girls pushed out their chairs, stood, and strolled out of the cafeteria casually —chatting to one other, grabbing an extra astromuffin, looking like it was just another day. Vega glanced around at everyone, fully aware that behind their calm exteriors, they were all just as tense and excited as she was. *We should join the acting club when this is all over,* thought Vega. *We're naturals!*

Vega arrived in Lady Stella's office right after Leona and Ophelia and just before Clover. They filed in and took their usual seats. As Vega drummed her fingers impatiently on the table, Libby twirled a piece of her pink hair around her finger, Leona scowled, Ophelia looked positively terrified, and Adora hummed tunelessly. "Stop it," snapped Tessa, and the two started to argue.

Then Lady Stella appeared in the doorway and everyone immediately hushed. Tall and regally beautiful, she wore a silver turban, and her lips were painted a brilliant shade of red. She spread her arms, her full sleeves ballooning out at her sides. She looked down at them with a tender smile.

"I realize you're all very excited and tense," she said. "But Star Darlings must always be respectful of each other. I just want to remind you that you were chosen not for your singularities but because of the way the twelve of you fit together, like the pieces of a puzzle. You must support

each other at all times, not tear each other down." Vega looked around the table. Everyone was rapt. She marveled at how even when they were being scolded by Lady Stella, everyone still looked grateful to have her attention.

"We're sorry, Lady Stella," said Tessa. Everyone murmured agreement.

Lady Stella clasped her hands. "As you know, a Star Darlings' Wish-Watcher has spotted a Wish Orb that has begun to glow," she told them. "This means that a Wisher's wish is ready to be granted, and one of you is the perfect Starling to fulfill that wish. One of you"—she paused—"will shortly be on your way to Wishworld to begin a journey that, if all goes well, will be beneficial to both you and your Wisher. And Starland itself, of course," she added. "Now we will head to the Star Caves once more for the Wish Orb presentation."

Lady Stella realized that one student was looking quite confused. She smiled at her kindly. "This is all new to you, Ophelia," she said to the new Star Darling. "You see, underneath the school are secret caves known only to me, the Star Darlings, and a special few of my trusted advisors. That is where we have our own secret Wish-House, where special Wish Orbs are planted. When a Wish Orb begins to glow, we hold a secret ceremony to determine which of you is best suited for the mission based on your talents and the nature of the wish."

Ophelia nodded mutely, her face drawn. She made Cassie, who (as usual) looked slightly ill at the possibility of going down to Wishworld, look starmendously excited in comparison.

Lady Stella walked to her desk, pulled open the top drawer, and reached inside. A hidden door in the back wall slid open and Ophelia gasped. A faint musty chill snuck into the room. Silently, the Star Darlings stood and made their way to the door in a calm and orderly fashion. There was no pushing or shoving or arguing as each girl patiently waited her turn to pass through the doorway and carefully made her way down the circular staircase, gripping the cold banister. Vega heard someone say, "After you, of course," and someone else said, "No, you first," and she grinned, knowing that the girls were going out of their way to show Lady Stella just how civilized and supportive they could be. The hard soles of Vega's blue clogs made sharp ringing sounds on the metal stairs. She felt light-headed, and the hand not clutching the banister was all fluttery, like it was trying to escape from the end of her arm. *I've never felt quite this nervous before,* she thought, surprised by her reaction. Just before every other Wish Orb presentation,

she had been as matter-of-fact as usual. She wasn't sure what was going on with her this time.

At the bottom of the steps, she jumped when Cassie put a cold hand around hers and gave it a squeeze. She smiled at her friend's thoughtfulness, especially since she knew how nervous Cassie must be.

"I'm sorry Scarlet isn't here," said Cassie in a low voice. "She loves these caves."

Leona turned around and scowled at them both. Vega ignored her and looked around the gloomy space, not certain what Scarlet found so appealing about the caves. They were dank and drippy, and they smelled old and musty. Strange creatures inhabited the dark corners, and you never knew when one might dart out and run across your foot, its claws scrabbling over your instep. She shivered at the thought, then had a sudden realization: that was exactly why the dark and mysterious Scarlet liked the caves, actually!

They walked through the gloom single file as Lady Stella led them down several twisty hallways, then came to a stop in front of a nondescript door. Vega blinked. She was fairly certain they had come an entirely different way the time before. The headmistress pushed open the door and grinned as glorious sunshine poured into the dark hallway. Ophelia gasped. And just like that, the flutterfocuses that had been dancing around in Vega's stomach vanished. That was exactly what was supposed to happen; she could feel it. She was suddenly, strangely, gloriously calm. She had this. She just knew it.

CHAPTER 4

And as she would soon find out, she was right. She watched as Ophelia gaped at the room. They were standing in a special Wish-House that had been built just for them. Although they were deep underneath Halo Hall, they could still look up through the glass roof and see blue sky and puffy white clouds drifting by.

"But…but…but it's impossible!" Ophelia said.

Leona shrugged. "Impossible…yet here we are," she replied.

Lady Stella led them to the center of the room, and they all grouped around the raised platform, where the Wish Orb would appear.

Lady Stella cleared her throat and Vega turned her attention to the headmistress. "As you know, or don't yet," she said, indicating Ophelia, "the Wish Orb will choose which of you is the best match for its wish." She clapped her hands and the room darkened. A beam of light shot down from above and illuminated the middle of the platform. It opened and a single Wish Orb appeared. There was a sharp intake of breath. Although they all (except Ophelia, of course) had seen this three times now, it was still a magical sight. The Wish Orb was round and looked like a beautiful iridescent bubble made of the finest spun glass. It glowed with remarkable intensity. There was a slight breeze, warm and refreshing at the same time, and the orb began to move around the platform, pausing for a moment in

front of each girl. Adora held out her hand as if to touch it, and the look of sadness on her face when it moved away was heartbreaking. Leona looked away as it passed, as if it pained her too much to see the orb. Cassie let out a large sigh as it went by (of relief, Vega was sure of it). The orb paused in front of Vega, and she held her breath, steeling herself for the disappointment she would feel if it moved on to the next Star Darling. But that moment never came. Vega looked at Lady Stella questioningly. The headmistress beamed, leaned over, and took the orb carefully in her hands. It lit up her beautiful face, and she turned to Vega. Her eyes sparkled with pleasure as she said, "The orb has chosen. It's yours, Vega."



Vega set three separate alarms on her Star-Zap that night, but she didn't need any of them, for Piper woke her up at the crack of dawn, talking in her sleep. Or to be more specific, yelling.

It was mostly gibberish and made no sense to Vega, but a couple of the words were clear: *help*, *stop*, and was that *thief*? Rubbing sleep from her eyes, Vega swung her legs out of bed, crossed the room, and shook Piper's shoulder, perhaps a bit more roughly than she intended. "Wake up!" Vega said. "You're dreaming!"

The sparkle of the morning stars was just starting to peek over the horizon, and the room was still deep in shadows. Vega switched on a light. She saw that Piper's eyes were open, but she was staring at Vega confusedly, like she didn't recognize her. Her cheeks were flushed and she had a terrified look on her face, her eyes darting around the room. "She stole my Wish Pendant! Where is my Wish Pendant?" she cried, looking around wildly. Vega still wasn't sure Piper knew where she was or even who Vega was. It was a little scary.

Vega's arm shot out and she began frantically rummaging around on Piper's nightstand, knocking over a glass of water. (It instantly dried, as spills always did on Starland.) Where was her Wish Pendant? Finally, her fingers closed on the cool metal of the bracelet. She held it aloft. "Here it is," she said soothingly. "Piper, it was only a dream." She slipped it onto Piper's wrist, which seemed to calm her immediately.

An expression of great relief flooded Piper's face. But then she looked up at Vega reproachfully. "Only a dream? Really? You know how important

dreams are!" she said coldly. "Especially to me!"

Vega shrugged. "Sorry," she said. "I…I wasn't thinking."

Piper sat up in bed, her fingers tightly wrapped around her Wish Pendant, as if the dream villain was going to reappear and try to wrest it away from her.

"Hand me my dream diary!" Piper demanded. This was very unlike her, and Vega stared for a moment. Piper corrected herself immediately. "Um, would you mind getting me my dream diary?" she asked sheepishly.

"Sure," said Vega. She hurried across the room and grabbed the top holo-diary in the basket. She handed it to Piper, who grasped it in her hands and closed her eyes, clearly trying hard to recall the dream. She finally tossed down the diary in frustration. "I can't remember!" she said sadly. "It's slipping away. All I can recall is that someone was chasing me, trying to take my Wish Pendant. I stopped to rest and they grabbed it." She thought hard. "I can't remember the face. Or even if it was a man or a woman. But it seemed so real…." Her voice trailed off.

Vega shivered. Piper was usually all relaxation and sleeping masks but at times could get quite creepy without warning. This was one of those times.

Vega looked at Piper for a moment, trying to return her to reality. "Well, I guess it's time to get ready for my Wish Mission," she said. No reaction. "My Wish Mission to Wishworld," she said loudly. Piper still sat up in bed, staring into space. *All this drama over a silly dream!* Vega thought. *She* was the one who should be anxious this morning, not Piper!

But it didn't register with Piper. She slowly stood up and walked to the sparkle shower room. "I'll take a sparkle shower now," she said. "Maybe that will help calm me down."

Vega shook her head. She had assumed it would go without saying that she would get to take the first sparkle shower of the day. She laughed. It wasn't like she had big plans or anything. She was just going to hitch herself to a blazing shooting star and hurtle down to a distant world. No big deal.

While she waited her turn, she neatened the already spotless room, returning Piper's holo-diary to the basket and making both of their beds. Piper's soft seafoam green sheets were so tangled up Vega wondered if she had actually been running in her sleep. She accessed the Wishworld Outfit

Selector but, after flipping through various options, decided she was happy with the choice she had made the previous night.

Vega stood over her bedside table, staring down at her Star-Zap. Her mother's face surrounded by a red star still sat in the corner of the screen, indicating the unreturned holo-call. She briefly considered calling her back, as it would be comforting to see her mom's face before her mission, despite the questions she would have to answer about scheduling a visit and the half-truths she would have to tell about her schooling. But then the sparkle shower room door slid open and Piper stepped out, a fresh glow on her skin.

"I feel much better," she told Vega.

"Great," Vega replied.

Vega abandoned her phone, grabbed her soft blue bathrobe, and stepped into the sparkle shower room. She glanced at the mirror. Her shiny blue hair was slightly mussed, and she smoothed it. Her bright blue eyes, the color of cloud-free skies, stared back at her. She was surprised to realize she still felt calm and relaxed. She took a long sparkle shower, even though she knew she would shortly be transforming her skin from sparkly to dull. It still was invigorating and good for the spirits. She slipped on a loose blue dress with a turquoise starburst on the front and a pair of pretty sandals. When Piper was ready, the two girls headed to the Celestial Café. The Star Darlings had all been instructed the day before to have a quick but nutritious breakfast and head straight to the private balcony of the Wishworld Surveillance Deck to see Vega off before classes began. As Vega approached the table, she was surprised to notice that the other Star Darlings looked more nervous than she felt. Leona appeared particularly out of sorts, staring down at her glass of glorange juice and not engaging in conversation with anyone —not even Ophelia, who looked more lost and lonely than usual. Maybe Leona was jealous of Vega's mission? Resentful that Vega was likely to collect wish energy? Or just feeling sad that her mission had not gone well and she most likely would not get a chance at redemption? Vega wasn't sure and she certainly wasn't going to ask.

There was a tray of baked goods in the middle of the table, and Vega grabbed a fruit bun and sank her teeth into it, then licked her hand as a blob of ozziefruit jam leaked out. *Yum.* Glancing down at her Star-Zap, Vega realized it was already time to go to the deck. She stood, her chair making a loud scraping sound on the floor. Cassie nodded at her across the table. Vega left the room, knowing that the other eleven would soon be following

her, drifting out casually in groups of two and three so as not to arouse any suspicion from their fellow students.

She walked a little more quickly than usual and hopped into an empty Flash Vertical Mover car and pressed the button. The doors slid shut and she took a deep breath, enjoying the solitude. The Wishworld Surveillance Deck towered ridiculously high above the campus, but the Flash Vertical Mover zoomed her up in mere starsecs. She swallowed hard to keep her ears from popping. Soon she was stepping out onto the deck. She had it all to herself, and she stood there for a moment, marveling at the view. It never ceased to amaze her that far below on Wishworld, Wishlings were living their lives, going to school, and making the wishes that kept life on Starland proceeding as usual. And soon she would be a crucial part of one Wishling's life, if only for a short time. She took a deep breath and monitored how she felt again. Fine—no flutterfocuses in the stomach, trembling hands, or racing thoughts. She was ready and confident in her ability to take on any challenge she was given.

The door opened and Tessa and Gemma joined her on the private balcony. Gemma opened her mouth to begin her usual chattering, but her older sister shushed her. Vega gave Tessa a grateful glance. She was quickly realizing that the time just before you took off on a Wish Mission was sacred and special, meant to be savored.

Lady Stella appeared, almost out of thin air. "Hello, Vega," she said. Her eyes were kind and warm. She squeezed Vega's shoulder and leaned down to speak to her privately. "You have the skills, you have the brains, and you certainly have the drive, my dear," she said. "Just make sure to see the forest for the trees. Don't get too caught up in the details, and try to see the bigger picture. This mission is tailor-made for you."

Vega felt warm pride rush through her. "Thank you for your confidence," she said.

The door opened and the rest of the Star Darlings spilled onto the balcony and clustered around Vega, giving her effusive hugs and showering her with good wishes. It was a little disorganized, and just as Vega began to feel overwhelmed by all the attention, Cassie noticed and stepped in, lining everyone up to say their farewells in an orderly fashion. Vega smiled at her friend in thanks.

Piper approached Vega, a slightly sleepy look still in her eyes. She grasped both of Vega's hands in her own. "I was so worked up this morning

I totally forgot about your mission," she said, looking ashamed. "Good luck, Vega."

Adora gave her a quick firm squeeze. "You'll be a superstar," she said. "There's no doubt about that."

Leona was next. "I hope you are able to collect wish energy," she said sadly. "Keep your eye on your Wish Pendant."

"I will," Vega promised her.

Libby said, "Take it from me: make sure to double-check that you have the right wish!"

"And the right Wisher," added Sage, poking her head over Libby's pink shoulder.

"Star salutations to you both," Vega said. She was touched that the girls were so willing to point out their mistakes to help her.

Gemma and Tessa stepped up to Vega together. "You're going to be startastic," Gemma told her. "Out of this world. The Wisher who gets you as their Wish-Granter is going to be absolutely starstruck! As a matter of fact __"

Tessa interrupted. "As a matter of fact, good luck from both of us," she said, dragging her sister away. She called back, "Don't forget to bring back some of that chocolate Sage talked so much about if you can!"

Cassie simply gave Vega a kiss on the cheek.

Ophelia was the last to approach Vega. "You don't look scared at all," she said shyly. Her large ochre eyes were wide with wonder. "Now how do you get down to Wishworld again?"

Before Vega could answer, Lady Cordial appeared and handed Vega her backpack. It was a pretty blue with a glittery star on it.

"Star salutations," said Vega.

Lady Cordial, who was perhaps nervous she would start stuttering, as she often did when she was around large groups of Starlings, simply nodded.

"Vega! We need you!" Lady Stella called from the edge of the roof. "The Star Wranglers have spotted a shooting star!" The crowd parted as Lady Stella held out her hand. It was almost as if things were happening in slow motion for Vega. She stepped forward to join Lady Stella and watched in silence as the wranglers tossed out the lasso and just missed catching the star. It hurtled through the heavens and disappeared. "Awww!" everyone said. Luckily, the wranglers spotted another one almost immediately. They

tossed out their lasso again and caught it. Sparks shot out as it strained against its restraints. Burning bright and beautiful, the star hovered in the air before them as the wranglers struggled to keep it steady.

Once Vega was safely attached, she paused to take one last look at everyone, their faces hopeful and concerned. “Good-bye!” she called. “I’ll do everyone pr—” Then her words were lost in a loud *whoosh* as she was released into the heavens, the wranglers no longer able to keep their grip on the star, which was desperate to continue its fiery arc.

Vega zoomed through the sky as whirling multicolored lights, intense fiery flares, and twinkling stars flashed by. But despite the distractions, she was somehow able to remain studiously focused on her Star-Zap. (She had made this journey once before, when she had helped Leona.) As soon as the screen began to flash COMMENCE APPEARANCE CHANGE, she was ready. She concentrated hard and could see from an errant wisp near the corner of her eye that her hair had changed from cerulean to a very dark brown—almost black. She pressed a button on her Star-Zap and was instantly wearing the outfit she had carefully picked out the night before—a skirt made out of a rough material the Wishlings called denim, a simple blue-and-white-striped long-sleeved T-shirt, and a matching denim vest. On her feet she wore pretty blue woven shoes called espadrilles. She put her hand on her Wish Pendant, which was the sparkling buckle of her belt, and began to say the words that would begin the last step of her physical transformation: “Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight: I wish I may, I wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight.” The Wish Pendant began to glow, and she gasped as the glitter was swept off her skin in a sudden rush of warm air.

PREPARE FOR LANDING, the Star-Zap read. Before she knew it, the surface of Wishworld was rushing up to meet her. She held her breath and landed gently in a grassy park. She blinked for a moment, taking in her surroundings, and let out her breath in one big whoosh. She hadn’t realized she was still holding it. It appeared that she had landed in a park at the bottom of a large landmass surrounded by water. The park was empty save a mother sitting on a bench next to a baby stroller, her back to Vega. The child, who had apparently witnessed Vega’s arrival, pointed at her and said, “Star.”

“That’s right,” said the mother in a loud sunny voice, pointing to a nearby yellow vehicle driving by on the street. “Car!”

Following the instructions she had been given, Vega waited until the star had sputtered out, then picked it up and began to fold it. When it was the size of a wallet and could not fold any more, she placed it in the front zippered portion of her backpack. She looked at her Star-Zap for further instructions. PROCEED DIRECTLY TO THE GEORGE ROBERT INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL FOR GIRLS, it said. Detailed directions followed, along with an estimated walking time of thirty starmins. Vega looked at her pretty shoes and immediately accessed her Wishworld Outfit Selector. She switched to a pair of blue sneakers and was off!

The farther uptown Vega walked, the bigger the buildings became and the more crowded the streets got. She stared openly at people and no one seemed to care or notice. She passed stores, gaping doorways that led to deep stairwells labeled SUBWAY, small parks filled with what looked like the youngest and oldest Wishlings and their respective caretakers, and lots of vehicles of all shapes and sizes, none self-driving. This part of Wishworld was noisier, dirtier, and stinkier than the first Wishworld place she had visited during Leona's mission. It was also much busier and more vibrant, she had to give it that.

Finally, she arrived at the school. The large, impressive white stone building stood in the middle of the city block. She admired the tall steps, the supporting columns. It reminded her a bit of Halo Hall. The street in front of the school was packed with idling cars, waiting to pick up students, she assumed.

She stole a glance at her Star-Zap and noted the time: 3:01 P.M. Just then, the doors burst open and students began to trickle out. Within moments the trickle became a flood.

Vega, who had just begun to climb the stairs, was pushing against the tide. A girl, her eyes glued to her phone, came straight toward her, and Vega stepped neatly out of the way, bumping right into someone else. "Starscu…I mean, excuse me," Vega said, but the girl didn't seem to hear. Forcing her way through the onslaught of students, she squeezed inside the door and found herself in the crowded school vestibule. She blinked, trying to get her bearings. A sign on the wall caught her eye. AFTER-SCHOOL CLUBS, it said, with an arrow pointing up. She looked down at her Wish Pendant, which was beginning to glow very faintly.

After-school clubs, here I come, she thought, taking the stairs marked *up*, which were empty, two at a time. (The stairs marked *down* were

bustling with students.) She reached the second floor and pushed open the heavy door. There she found a woman in a navy jacket sitting behind a table, a clipboard in front of her. She was speaking to a boy holding a potted plant. “The Venus Flytrap Club is in room 222,” she told him. She turned to Vega. “Welcome!” she said, looking over her glasses at her. “How can I help you?”

“I am Vega. I am a new student.”

The woman nodded. “You are Vega. You are a new student,” she said automatically.

“Which club are you headed to?” the woman asked. That question stumped Vega. What kinds of clubs did Wishlings have? Was there a star ball club? A wish energy manipulation club? Probably not.

“Oh,” Vega said, smiling. She made a guess. “Puzzle Club?”

The woman’s brow furrowed and she scanned her list. She looked up. “No, no Puzzle Club. Though that does sound like fun,” she said. “Are you sure that’s the right club?”

Vega thought again. “Ahhh, ahhhh…”

“Acrobatics Club?” the woman suggested helpfully.

It was as good as any. “That’s it!” said Vega.

“Room 212,” the woman said. “Right down the hallway.” As Vega turned away, she heard the woman say, “Mmmmm, I smell pound cake!” *So it’s true,* Vega thought. To Wishling adults, Starlings smelled like their favorite baked good from childhood. *Maybe to put them at ease or something,* Vega thought. It was odd but kind of nice when you thought about it. Her very presence brought back pleasant childhood memories.

Vega glanced down at her belt buckle Wish Pendant and noticed that the glow was a bit brighter than before. She paused in front of room 212. What were the chances that her Wisher would be in this club? She shrugged and opened the door. At least it was a start.

The floor of room 212 was covered with thick padded mats. Girls wearing tightly fitting shirt-underwear combinations were sitting on the mats, doing splits and stretching. Vega found their costumes to be very odd and was a little taken aback that no one was wearing pants.

A girl in a red, white, and blue underwear suit turned to her. “Hey,” she said. “You must be new. Welcome!” She looked Vega up and down. “Where’s your leotard?”

“My what?” asked Vega. *Mission 4, Wishworld Observation #1: Some Wishlings wear a legless article of clothing called a leotard. Function: unclear at this point.*

The girl laughed, apparently assuming Vega was kidding with her. “No worries,” she said.

“Oh, I wasn’t worried,” Vega assured her.

The girl laughed again. “We usually start with some headstands,” she informed Vega. “Then we move on to forward rolls, bridges, handstands, back flips, and then we end with a pyramid!”

Vega raised her eyebrows. “Oh,” she said. It sounded very busy. She watched as the girl dropped to the ground, placed her head on the floor, and balanced her knees on her elbows before extending her legs straight up into the air. Once she was certain of her balance, she began bending her legs in different poses. The other girls followed suit.

Vega was game. After several attempts, she was able to shakily stand on her head. She felt very proud of herself in the split second before she spilled onto the floor. She put her head back down and was face-to-face with her middle, about to balance her knees on her elbows, when she realized that her belt, mere inches from her face, was no longer glowing. *It’s been fun, Acrobatics Club,* she thought as she got to her feet. *But I have to move on.* With an apologetic grin, she headed toward the door. The girl who had first welcomed her looked at Vega as if she had betrayed her. “We were going to put you on top of the human pyramid!” she said.

“Maybe next time,” said Vega. She shuddered at the thought, relieved to be dodging that experience.

Once she was back in the hallway, her Wish Pendant began to glow faintly again. Her Wisher was near. There was no question about it. She just needed to be patient.

Vega decided to try the classroom next door. She opened the door, and the teacher and two students looked up eagerly from the bucket they were inspecting. Vega stared. What could possibly be going on there?

“Welcome to Composting Club!” the teacher said.

“Is everyone here?” Vega asked.

“Um, yes,” the teacher said. She laughed sheepishly. “We’re a small club.”

Vega looked down at her pendant. No glow at all.

“Sorry!” she said, starting to close the door. The students looked disappointed for a moment but immediately returned to examining the bucket. Vega never found out exactly what was inside. *Mission 4, Wishworld Observation #2: Composting Club does not seem very popular. Look into this.*

She watched with interest as several students parried in the Fencing Club, their faces obscured by strange masks. Her eyes widened as students pantomimed being trapped in invisible boxes, pulled ropes she couldn’t see, and walked into a nonexistent gust of wind in Mime Club. And the smells coming from Cooking Club were tantalizing. But she was on a mission. Until the light glowed on her pendant, she had to keep looking. *Just how many clubs does this school have, anyway?* she wondered.

“Forty-seven,” someone said.

Vega spun around. She hadn’t realized she had said the words out loud. A girl stood in front of her, her orangey hair cascading down her back in rippling curls. Her eyes were bright blue and her pretty face was covered in freckles that reminded Vega of constellations.

“How many clubs did you say?” Vega asked.

“Forty-seven,” the girl repeated.

“That’s a lot of clubs,” Vega said shakily.

The girl grinned. “There’s something for everyone,” she said. “And then some.” She cocked her head at Vega. “So let me guess. You’re new and haven’t found the right club yet?”

“That’s right. I’m Vega, by the way.”

The girl stuck out her hand. “Katie.”

Vega recalled immediately that she was supposed to grasp and pump the hand, otherwise known as “shaking.” Libby had certainly made a mess of that on her Wish Mission! While Vega made contact, she took a quick glance at her Wish Pendant, which told her that this girl was not her Wisher. Too bad. She seemed nice.

Katie smiled at Vega. “You want to join a really fun club? Come with me,” she said. She set off down the hallway. Not knowing what else to do, Vega followed her.

CHAPTER 5

Katie pushed open the door to room 261. “Come right in,” she said. About ten students sat in a circle. Vega stared at them. They had large balls of thick string in their laps and long sticks in their hands. They moved the sticks back and forth. It was very strange.

“What club is this?” Vega asked.

Katie laughed. “You’re so funny! What else could it be? It’s Knitting Club, of course!”

Vega knew that the only reason she was making everyone laugh was that she didn’t understand Wishling ways, but she still enjoyed it, basking in the warm glow of her classmates’ grins. Back home she was the serious one; on Wishworld she already had a reputation as a joker. It felt good to be thought of as funny.

“Welcome,” said the teacher, a tall thin woman with curly brown hair and thick glasses. “I assume you know how to cast on?” She handed Vega her own ball of string and two of the pointy sticks. “You can borrow these for today. Next week you should bring your own yarn and needles.”

Vega knew that no matter what happened, good or bad, the Countdown Clock would have run out of time before next week’s class. Still, she nodded in agreement. She was afraid to ask what “casting on” was, in case it was a special Wishling skill that everyone was born with. So she stared at

the needles and the ball of yarn, willing herself to figure out how to do it. As you might imagine, that didn't work. Not about to waste any of her precious wish energy in the attempt to acquire knowledge, she decided she'd fake it. But she had no idea what to do. She was tempted to leave the room and consult her Star-Zap for possible directions, but then she glanced down at her lap and saw her Wish Pendant. It was glowing! Her Wisher was near. Startastic!

She looked around the room eagerly. Who could it be? The girl with the long dark hair and nervous laugh who was knitting so quickly her needles flashed? The girl with the short blond hair who was creating what looked like the world's longest (and lumpiest) scarf? Or maybe it was the girl who was sitting next to her, scowling as she ripped out a row of stitches?

Keep cool, Vega, she said to herself. *You'll figure it out.* She remembered what she had learned in Wishers 101 class: FIGGO—Fitting In Guarantees Good Outcome. She picked up the needles and began to wrap the yarn around them. *Maybe this is how you start,* she thought in desperation.

She looked at Katie for help. But she was talking a mile a minute to another girl and gesturing with one of her needles. The other girl was half-listening, a nervous eye trained on the moving needle in Katie's hand.

Vega stared down at her own needles helplessly.

"Hey, do you need help?" someone asked.

She looked up hopefully. A girl was smiling down, peering at her from behind funny-shaped eyeglasses without any lenses in them, her curly black hair cut with uneven bangs and one side longer than the other. Always-precise Vega was surprised to find that rather than looking strange, the haircut gave the girl an endearingly off-kilter look. Her simple black sweater had a bright pink fuzzy neckline. She wore a slim black skirt and bright pink tights, and her chunky black boots looked artfully beat-up. They were embellished with bright paint splatters. Vega looked at her admiringly. Vega was more of a dress-for-comfort kind of girl, but even she could tell the girl had style.

"I just finished my project, a shrug," she said, holding up an adorable abbreviated sweater that had only arms and shoulders. It was made out of glittery maroon wool. "I don't have anything to do, so I'm all yours!" She sat down in the chair next to Vega's. "Give me your hand," she said. Vega obeyed, and the girl laid the end of the yarn on Vega's palm, looped over

itself. “Now watch,” she said, sticking her fingers through the loop and pulling the yarn through. “See? A slipknot. That’s how you start.”

She took Vega’s knitting needle and poked it through the hole. Then she showed her how to cast on, making an X with the needles, looping the yarn around the back needle, pulling it underneath, and then slipping the other needle through to steal it back.

“Now you try,” she said.

Vega stuck out her tongue in concentration. After a couple of false starts, she began to get the hang of it. She smiled. It was an odd Wishling pastime, but she could see its appeal. *Mission 4, Wishworld Observation #3: Knitting seems complicated, but it’s not as hard as it looks. It’s actually quite relaxing!*

“Hey, you’re a good teacher,” she said. “What’s your name? I’m Vega.”

“Hello, Vega,” the girl said. “I’m Ella. So, are you ready to knit?”

Vega nodded. It was the same process, except after you pulled the stitch underneath, you slipped it off one of the needles and onto the other.

“I’m knitting!” Vega cried.

“Amazing,” said the girl. “You’re a quick learner. Once you do a couple of rows, I’ll teach you how to purl.” She looked down at Vega’s waist. “Hey,” she said. “What a cool belt buckle! How does it glow? Does it have a battery or is it solar powered?”

Vega nearly dropped her knitting as she looked down at her belt. It was definitely glowing. Still, better safe than sorry. Her eyes on the belt, she walked away from Ella and stood next to another girl, who looked up at her in confusion. The belt buckle dimmed. She sidled up to Ella, who had started knitting again. It glowed once more. Ella smiled and shook her head. “You’re so funny!” she said.

There it was again! Vega grinned. She was having the best time on Wishworld. She had learned to knit, found her Wisher, and made several Wishlings laugh.

Her mission was off to a startastic start!



When Knitting Club was over, Vega returned the needles and yarn to the teacher and promised (falsely) that she would bring her own supplies the next week. Then she turned around to look for Ella. But Ella was gone.

Vega ran to the top of the stairs. She spotted Ella's pink collar and multicolored boots just as they disappeared through the door.

"Ella! Wait!" she called. Vega ran down the steps, but when she pushed open the door, her Wisher was nowhere to be found. There was a line of cars waiting to pick up students. *Ella must be in one of them,* she thought. She stepped off the curb and tried peering through the windows of one. But all she could see was her own curious face and dark brown hair, which she still hadn't gotten used to. It was impossible to see inside the car.

The window rolled down. It was Katie. "Hey, Vega, are you looking for your driver?" the girl asked.

"Um…no," said Vega. "Just looking for Ella."

"Don't know what to tell you. She disappeared," said Katie with a shrug. "She's good at that."

"Okay, thanks," said Vega. She turned to walk away.

"Hey, do you need a ride somewhere?" Katie asked, leaning her head out the window.

Vega looked down the street one last time. But Ella was definitely gone. "Um, sure. As long as your dad doesn't mind," she said, indicating the man who sat behind the wheel.

Katie laughed. "You crack me up. You know that's my driver!"

Katie opened the door and slid over. As Vega settled into the soft black seat, Katie handed her a black buckle on a strap.

"Thanks," said Vega, taking it from her and holding on to it.

Katie looked at her funny.

"What?" said Vega.

Katie burst into laughter. "Oh, Vega!" she said fondly. She reached across her and snapped it into the latch. The strap felt snug against Vega's torso.

"Oh, it's a restraining device!" she said. Self-driving Starland cars never, ever got into accidents, so Starlings were free to move about in their vehicles at all times. Vega felt oddly constrained but didn't say anything.

Katie smiled. "So how did you like Knitting Club?" she asked. "I was right, pretty fun, huh?"

"Yeah," said Vega. "I liked it." Then she added, "So, um, what's Ella like?"

"Oh, she's really nice. She's in my class," Katie said.

Vega sat up straight. "Oh, really?" she said. "Uh…me too!"

"You are?" said Katie. She shrugged. "That's cool. She's new this year. She has all these great outfits, because her mom is a famous fashion designer." She looked embarrassed. "I actually tried to Google her mom once, but I couldn't find anything. She must be, like, totally exclusive."

Google? Vega tried to look wise. She nodded. "Totally. Well, that makes sense, about her mom being a fashion designer, that is. She did have on a startas—I mean, a fantastic outfit."

"It was pretty sick," said Katie.

Vega stared at her. Perhaps Katie had misunderstood her. "Oh, no, I meant that I enjoyed it," Vega explained.

Katie grinned and gave Vega a friendly punch on her arm. "There you go again."

Mission 4, Wishworld Observation #4, thought Vega. *Sometimes Wishlings use words the opposite way. For example,* sick.

"Oh, you'll see," said Katie. "She wears a cool outfit every day." She thought for a minute. "I guess I don't really know all that much about her. She kind of keeps to herself. She never invites anyone over. It could be because her mom designs her clothes at home and everything needs to be top secret," she mused. "Or maybe it's because her mom has to travel a lot."

"Oh," said Vega. She started thinking. Maybe Ella's wish was to spend more time with her mother. She wondered how she would make that happen. Maybe she could suggest they take up a hobby together….

Katie was looking at her intently. "I said, where should we drop you off, Vega?"

Vega snapped back to reality. *Uh-oh.* She had no idea what to tell her. Then she had a sudden brainstorm. "Your house?" she suggested. "My mom's at work, so I have some time to kill."

The other girl's face lit up in a smile. "Excellent," she said. "Maybe you could stay for dinner!"

"I'd love to," said Vega.

After a couple more blocks, the car stopped and the driver got out and opened the door for them. They stepped onto the sidewalk under an awning.

"Thank you, Michael," said Katie. "See you tomorrow!"

"Thank you," echoed Vega.

A smiling man in a fancy uniform held the door of the building open for them. "Good evening, Katie," he said.

"Good evening, Henry," she replied.

They walked through the lobby, past a large marble table, on which rested the largest vase of flowers Vega had ever seen. She literally could have taken a dip in it. They stepped into the elevator, where another uniformed man was waiting.

"Hello, Ernest," Katie said, and he nodded, taking the girls straight to the right floor. "Going up!" he said.

Vega followed Katie down a polished hallway to a door. Katie rang the doorbell, which chimed melodiously. A woman, clad in a gray dress with a white apron over it, answered the door.

"Welcome home, Katie," she said.

Katie gave her a quick hug. "Marta, this is my friend Vega. She's going to stay for dinner tonight."

"Very good," Marta said. She nodded and disappeared.

"Is that your mom?" asked Vega curiously.

Katie snorted. "No, my mom doesn't wear a uniform, silly. And I don't call her by her first name, either. That's our housekeeper." She playfully punched Vega in the arm again. "You're so funny!"

My *mom wears a uniform,* thought Vega. She realized she had to start keeping her observations to herself. She wasn't really blending in. In fact, she was starting to stick out like a sore thumb. How soon before her funny comments caught some unwanted attention?

"Want a tour?" asked Katie.

"Sure," said Vega.

The tour took half an hour. They started in the sun-filled living room, which was bigger than the apartment Vega grew up in. They saw the dining room, with a table big enough for fourteen; the huge gleaming kitchen; and at least four bedrooms. Vega lost count. "My mom and dad's room is that way," said Katie, pointing to an unexplored wing of the house. Off a library, filled from floor to ceiling with real paper books, was a balcony that overlooked a huge green rectangle. "That's the park," Katie explained.

Vega nodded. Which park? She wanted to ask, but she knew enough by then not to.

The tour continued: The windowless media room with a huge screen, plush red theater seats, and a popcorn machine. The maid's room. The laundry room. They ended the tour in Katie's enormous bedroom—complete with huge canopy bed, private bathroom, a crafts table, and a gigantic walk-in closet.

Vega's eyes were huge. "My stars," she said.

A bell jangled.

"Dinnertime!" said Katie. The two girls washed their hands and headed back to the dining room. Luckily, Katie waited for Vega, or she would probably have gotten lost trying to find it.

The enormous dining room table was set for two. Vega didn't think twice about that. She had often eaten alone when her mother worked late. She sat at the table, unfolded her napkin, and placed it across her lap.

Just then a lovely woman in a long black dress swept into the room. Her shining blond hair was twisted into a sleek updo. Vega admired the sparkling white crystals she wore around her wrist and neck.

"This is my mother, Mrs. O'Toole," Katie said. "Mom, this is my new friend Vega."

"You look beautiful!" Vega exclaimed.

"She's dressed like this because she's off to a benefit tonight," Katie explained.

"Vega. What a pretty name," said Mrs. O'Toole. "I'm pleased to meet you."

"Pleased to meet you," Vega repeated. What a lovely Wishling expression!

"And what a pretty haircut," Katie's mother said. She took a closer look at Vega's hair. "Look at that! There's a hidden layer of blue underneath in the back!"

"There is?" said Vega, reaching back to touch her hair.

Mrs. O'Toole and Katie laughed the same tinkling laugh. "Your new friend is funny," Mrs. O'Toole said to Katie.

"Tell me about it," said Katie.

Mrs. O'Toole turned to her daughter. "Daddy and I will be out late tonight, so you must listen to Marta. And go to bed when she tells you." She sniffed the air. "Did Marta make lemon meringue pie?" she asked.

Katie gave her mom a strange look. "I don't think so," she said. Then her eyes lit up. "Hey, can Vega sleep over tonight?"

"I'm sure her mother is expecting her," Mrs. O'Toole said worriedly. "And it is a school night. And we've never met, so I can't imagine that her mother would allow—"

"Why don't I stay over tonight?" interrupted Vega. "My mother won't mind."

Katie's mother got a funny look on her face. "Why don't you stay over tonight?" she said. "Your mother won't mind."

Katie looked puzzled, but delight won out over confusion, and she hugged Vega, then her mother. "That's totally dope, Mom!" she said.

"Glad to be so dope," said her mother. "Word."

"Now you're embarrassing me," said Katie.

A man in a white shirt, a black suit, and a black bow tie strode into the room. "Who's embarrassing you?" he asked. "Is it me in my penguin suit?"

He looked dashing, so Vega knew he was kidding. He introduced himself to Vega, then said to Katie, "I'm getting dragged to another of your mother's charity events. I'd much rather stay home and watch baseball with you!"

Katie grinned. "Tomorrow night, Daddy. The whales need you."

He rumpled her hair. "Tomorrow night it is." He stood up and smiled. "You girls are in for a treat. It smells like Marta made chocolate layer cake!"



After dinner Vega watched as Katie did her homework. Sitting silently as Katie struggled with math was particularly painful for Vega, so she stood, walked to the window, and looked up, searching the night sky. But to her dismay she couldn't see a single star.

There was a scratching sound at the door and Vega whirled around. To her surprise, two enormous furry creatures bounded into the room. Vega took one look and screamed.

Katie looked up and laughed. "Don't be scared. That's just Felix and Oscar. My mother raises Afghan hounds," she explained.

Vega stared at the tall, slender, long-haired creatures. "They're dogs?" she guessed.

Katie laughed. "Well, they're not hamsters," she said.

"They're not?" said Vega.

Katie grinned. "Vega, you are too much. They're my mother's show dogs."

They put on shows? Vega wondered. *What is their talent?* But she wisely kept her thoughts to herself this time.

‘They compete in dog shows all over the country,” explained Katie. “They are the most spoiled dogs in the city, I swear. They have their own water fountain in the kitchen, their own special shower room, and they eat meals prepared by a doggy chef. You can’t make this stuff up.”

Vega tentatively held out her hand and one of the dogs licked it. It was kind of gross and kind of cool at the same time. She patted its head and then, emboldened, began to stroke its silky fur. The other dog poked her with its long nose, looking for attention, too.

Katie grinned. “You’ll never get rid of them now.”

“Katie?” asked Vega.

“Yeah?”

“Does everyone at school live in as big a place as this?”

Katie thought for a moment. “Most of them, I guess,” she said. She frowned. “Actually, not everyone. There are some FA kids who live outside the city, in smaller apartments.”

“FA kids?” asked Vega.

“Financial aid,” Katie explained. “You know. The kids that get scholarships to be able to go to school.”

“All schools aren’t free?” asked Vega. That was strange. They were on Starland.

“Definitely not,” Katie said. “Especially ours!”



That night Vega lay in an impeccably decorated guest room under crisp white sheets and a blanket the color of the early-morning sky and as soft as a baby’s skin. She ran over the day’s events and her next steps, making a mental list.

1) Make secondary contact with Ella.
2) Get invited over to her house.
3) Determine wish.
4) Make wish come true.

And then she couldn’t help adding:

5) Help Leona become happy again.
6) Find Scarlet (and convince her to rejoin band).
7) Check on flowers in botany lab (and hopefully collect on bet!).
8) Try to get along better with Piper.
9) Call Mom back.



As Vega thought of her mom, she pictured her curling up in bed with a good holo-book and some jellyjoobles, her mom's favorite thing to do after a long shift at the hospital. Then Vega got a weird lump in her throat and she had to get up and drink a glass of water. But it didn't help. So to feel better, she closed her eyes and repeated her mantra over and over again:

You are the missing piece of the puzzle.
You are the missing piece of the puzzle.
You are the missing piece of the puzzle.
You are the missing piece of the puzzle.
You are the missing piece of the puzzle.
You are the missing piece of the puzzle.
Until she fell finally fell asleep, a peaceful smile on her face.

CHAPTER 6

"Shouldn't we wait for your parents?" asked Vega as she slathered jam on a delicious-smelling crossed-sant, or at least that's what she thought it was called. Surely this gigantic spread was not for just her and Katie. She popped a fat red berry with little yellow seeds all over it into her mouth and poured herself a glass of freshly squeezed glorange juice.

Or-ange, she corrected herself.

"Oh, no, I'm sure they were up really late last night," explained Katie.

Vega felt another lump rise in her throat as she recalled how her mother had greeted her with a tasty breakfast every morning before she went to school, regardless of how late her mom had worked the night before.

It was pleasant to ride to school in the luxurious car and have the door opened for them, like they were famous or something. The girls walked up the stone steps and Vega followed Katie into her classroom. She walked right up to the teacher and introduced herself as she had been instructed. "Hello, I am Vega, the new student in your class," she told her teacher, Ms. McKenney, a woman with green eyes, auburn hair, and an easy grin.

It worked like a charm. And it made her happy when Ms. McKenney said that the room smelled like coconut layer cake.

Vega got settled at her new desk and waited patiently for her Wisher to appear. She was starting to get anxious when Ms. McKenney shut the door

and started the morning's attendance and Ella still hadn't arrived. Finally, to Vega's relief, there was a knock on the door. Ms. McKenney opened it. "Thanks for joining us!" she said to the red-faced girl. She said it kindly, but Ella looked miserable as she slunk to her seat behind Katie.

"Your driver got stuck in traffic?" Katie asked sympathetically.

Ella raised her eyebrows. "Yeah, something like that," she muttered.

Vega was not a fashionista; she was the furthest thing from it, actually, as she preferred function over form at all times. But once again she had to admire Ella's outfit choice: a black cape with a hood over a pair of jeans with artfully arranged multicolored patches and a pair of distressed ankle boots. She could see Scarlet (poor Scarlet) wearing that exact same cape. The arms, she decided as she watched, looked very much like bat wings. Yes, Scarlet would be all over that cape in an instant. Ella removed the cape and hung it over the back of her seat, revealing the sparkly maroon shrug she had completed in Knitting Club the day before.

As the morning progressed, Vega was disappointed to discover that there were no clues to be had about Ella's wish. The girl seemed to have it all—smarts (she finished a math problem everyone else but Vega, of course, was struggling with), admirers (three girls told her they were going to join the Knitting Club, too, so they could learn how to knit a shrug just like hers), and style. What could Ella want that she didn't have? Vega wondered. The only possible lead she had at the moment was Ella's busy designer mom. She'd have to look into that, and soon.

The bell rang for lunch and the students stood at their desks, putting books and papers and writing utensils into their backpacks. "Class! Class!" shouted Ms. McKenney. "Don't forget that Bring Your Parent to School Day is coming up on Friday. There are still some parents we haven't heard from, so please have them fill out the slip and return it to me as soon as you are able. We would like all our parents to participate if possible!"

She indicated a list pinned to the bulletin board. Vega stole a glance at the list on her way out the door. Ella's name was not on it. She got a shiver of excitement and wondered: *Could this be my first clue?*

She could be on to something. She watched with interest as Katie turned and spoke briefly with Ella.

Ella disappeared into the surge of students in the hallway, and Vega hurried to catch up with Katie. "What did you say to Ella?" she asked.

"Oh, I just told her how excited I am to meet her mom," she said.

“And what did Ella say?” Vega asked.

“She said she doesn’t think it’s going to happen. Her mom is in Paris and she doesn’t think she’ll be back in time,” Katie said, frowning. She crossed her fingers. “Fingers crossed she can make it!”

Vega headed to the cafeteria in search of Ella. She couldn’t find her anywhere, and finally her hunger got the better of her and she got into the lunch line behind some other students. The line was long, and she used the opportunity to try to discover her special talent. She ran down a mental list. It wasn’t levitation or making time stand still (or speed up). She turned to the girl behind her and tried out mind reading (nothing). She stared at a cookie, willing it to disappear. Nothing. Finally, it was her turn to order her lunch. She glanced up at all the unfamiliar menu items. Pizza. Hamburgers. Chicken tenders. Tomato soup. Grilled cheese. Suddenly, she had an idea. She surreptitiously tapped her elbows together three times for luck. “I’ll have a slice of pizza please,” she told the woman pleasantly. Then she thought, *Give me a grilled cheese. Give me a grilled cheese. Give me a grilled cheese.*

The woman reached for the pizza, then stopped, a puzzled look on her face. Before Vega’s delighted eyes, she shook her head, picked up a toasted sandwich, and handed it to Vega uncertainly.

“Thank you so much!” Vega said effusively. Now she was certain! Her star talent was mind control! This was a tough one because she knew that she couldn’t use this talent directly on her Wisher. So she wasn’t sure exactly how she was going to use it, but she was certainly glad to have the knowledge in her back pocket.

She grabbed some napkins (paper, which was odd to her) and then stood uncertainly, balancing her tray as she scanned the room, looking for a familiar face. She smiled when she spotted Katie. Even better, there was an empty seat at her table. Vega headed over.

“Vega!” said Katie. “Sit down. You remember Luna, Callie, and Lila from class?”

The girls smiled at her and Vega nodded back, although she had been so focused on Ella, she hadn’t noticed any of the other students.

Vega sat and took a bite of her grilled cheese sandwich. She was pleasantly surprised by how tasty it was. She chewed and swallowed. “So what happens on Bring Your Parents to School Day?” she asked.

“Oh, parents come in and talk to the students about their jobs,” Katie explained.

“Are your parents coming in?” Vega asked.

“My dad is supposed to come in and talk about derivatives,” she said. “I love my dad to death but…” She gave a dramatic jaw-cracking yawn. “Will either of your parents be able to come?”

Vega’s eyes widened. “Oh, I don’t think so,” she said. “They’re, um, away.” That certainly wasn’t a lie. They were both away from her at the moment; that was for sure. Vega’s dad even more so, ever since she was three staryears old. He visited her sporadically and sent her a Bright Day gift every staryear, but he had a new family now in Light City, and every Bright Day she got a staryear older, but his gifts did not. It was like she was five staryears old permanently, in his mind. Vega couldn’t throw the gifts away, as inappropriate as they were, and she kept them in the bottom drawer of her dresser. She rarely opened the drawer; it made her very sad to look at them.

The rest of the girls at the table started talking excitedly about who would be the most interesting parent. One girl’s mother was a famous actress. Another girl’s father had written a best-selling book. Another girl’s mother was something called a plastic surgeon, which seemed like it could be quite interesting, as some Wishlings apparently liked to alter their looks. That thought was quite foreign to Vega, because every Starling was innately proud of his or her unique appearance.

Katie grinned. “I hope Ella’s mom comes in. I want to ask her where she gets her inspiration from.”

“That’s right,” said another girl. “I mean, her designs are to die for. Ella always looks so good!”

Vega had a free period after lunch, so she headed to the library to wander through the stacks of those paper books Sage and Libby had told her about. She smiled when she stepped inside. The room had floor-to-ceiling windows and a balcony, and everywhere she looked were books, books, and more books, in all colors of the rainbow and all shapes and sizes. Some had hard covers and some had soft covers. Some had the sharp smell of a just-printed page and others had crumbly pages and the odor of history and decay. She wandered through the stacks, pulling out titles and leafing through them. She reached for an extra-large book, called *Guinness World Records*, and was staring with fascination at the picture on the cover

—a photo of a man with hundreds of smoking sticks shoved into his mouth—when she looked up and realized that the empty space allowed her to see through the stack to the other side. And there stood Ella!

The girl was stock-still, her fingers crossed and her eyes screwed tightly shut. Could she be…could she be wishing? Vega's heart began to race. She whipped out her Star-Zap and pressed the holo-vid button. An actual Wisher in the act of wishing! Everyone would want to see this! "I'm going to try again," she heard Ella whisper. She screwed her eyes shut and crossed her fingers. "I wish this lie of mine would just go away!"

A sudden electric jolt ran through Vega and she dropped her Star-Zap with a clatter. *"Starf!"* she cried.

When Vega straightened up, her Star-Zap in hand, Ella was standing right next to her, glowering. "Were you *spying* on me?" she demanded.

Vega held out her hands to Ella. "Don't be mad at me," she implored. "I can help you! Just tell me—what do you wish you hadn't lied about?"

Ella stared at Vega, furious. "You want to know what I really wish?" she whispered harshly. "I wish that you would leave me alone. Do you think you can help me with that?"

CHAPTER 7

The entire rest of the day, Vega got the silent treatment from Ella. And everybody noticed.

Katie went up to Vega as they made their way to gym class. “What did you say to Ella?” she asked. “Whoa, you are totally getting frozen out.”

That was a good way to describe it, Vega thought. There was a definite chill in the air anytime Ella was around. Vega didn’t know what to do. Her Countdown Clock told her she had twenty-one starhours to grant the wish. She felt like a failure. She was definitely the first Star Darling whose Wisher wouldn’t acknowledge her existence.

In the locker room, Vega was handed a uniform that was tight in the places it should have been baggy and baggy in the places it should have been tight.

“Oh, boy,” Katie said when Vega walked into the gym. “That’s unfortunate.”

Vega shrugged. She had way bigger problems than an ill-fitting gym uniform. “Do you think we’ll play lodgeball?” she asked Katie, remembering the game that Sage had told her about witnessing her Wisher play during her mission. “Maybe Ella and I will be on the same team.”

Katie chortled. “Oh, Vega, you’re so funny,” she said. “And it’s not just that ridiculous uniform. Lodgeball!” The gym teacher stood in front of the

room, a whistle around her neck. “Today we start our lessons in square dancing,” she announced.

Up went a chorus of groans, which the gym teacher ignored. “Square dancing is a type of folk dance,” she went on. “Please break up into groups of eight and form a square, two partners on each side.”

Katie grabbed Vega’s hand and together they formed one side of a square. Vega noticed with disappointment that Ella positioned herself as far away from Vega as she could while still remaining in the gymnasium. She shook her head. How was she going to fix this?

Vega turned to Katie. “What’s so bad about square dancing?” she asked.

“You’ll see,” replied Katie grimly.

But Vega didn’t see. It turned out she absolutely loved square dancing. It might have been the orderly way everyone moved. It might have been the sheer novelty of it. Or it might have been the opportunity she had to promenade, do-si-do, and swing with seven different people. Because every time she promenaded, do-si-doed, swung her partner, or allemanded, she got to chat with someone else.

“So tell me about Ella,” she said under her breath as she promenaded with a curly-headed girl named Grace.

“Oh, she’s nice,” Grace said. “She’s got great style.”

When Vega bowed to her side, she asked a blond girl, “Have you ever been to Ella’s house?”

“Never,” was the answer. “She never invites anyone over.” She lowered her voice. “I think it must be because her mom has some secret designs lying around the house or something. The fashion industry can be cutthroat!”

“Now everybody swing,” called the teacher, and Vega found out about every trend Ella had started as she linked arms and swung around with each dancer. Arm warmers. Cat-eye glasses. Two different-colored socks. Mismatched earrings. Paint-speckled shoes. “This,” said a girl, holding up a necklace with a brightly painted key on it. “We all wear them now, just like Ella,” she explained.

Just then a shiver went down Vega’s spine and her skin began to tingle. It was subtle, but it had to be a sign, didn’t it? She turned to grin at Ella, across the gym, who glowered back at her. Did she know Vega was talking about her? Vega was pretty sure she had figured out what Ella’s lie was. Now she just had to talk to Ella and convince the other girl to let her help

fix it. This was going to be a piece of pie. She smiled smugly, mentally congratulating herself for remembering the Wishling phrase that Sage had shared with everyone.



Back in the classroom, Vega received an unexpected opportunity from Ms. McKenney. “Class,” the teacher announced, “I want you to pair up to do your writing homework tonight. Your assignment is to interview a classmate with these questions.” She held up a sheaf of papers and began handing them out.

“Katie, you’re paired with Ivy,” she said. “Jill and Maya, please take turns interviewing each other.”

Vega saw her chance. She closed her eyes and concentrated. This was going to take an awful lot of her wish energy reserve, so she hoped it would work.

“Ella, you are paired with…Lu…Lu…Lu…” She clearly wanted to say a particular name, but it wouldn’t come out. “Vega,” she finally said.

It had worked! The grin on Vega’s face was as intense as Ella’s grimace. Maybe even more so.



Vega leaned her back against the locker next to Ella’s. Ella was aggressively shoving books into her backpack and trying to ignore Vega. But the Starling was fully determined to use this opportunity to her advantage.

“So shall we head to your house?” Vega suggested hopefully.

Ella looked up suddenly, and Vega saw a flash of something in her eyes —anger, or could it be panic? But the girl smoothly said, “Oh, they’re polishing our marble entryway today. Let’s go to your house instead.”

Vega actually did panic. “I…um…my…can’t,” was all she managed to say.

Ella had the good grace not to laugh at Vega’s awkwardness. “Okay then, let’s go to the Munch Box,” she said, narrowing her eyes at Vega. “Let’s get this over with.”

The two girls left the school in silence and headed down the steps together. Ella led Vega down the block to a friendly little coffee shop with cozy booths and a counter with funny round seats that appeared to be bolted to the floor. The two girls settled into a booth. Ella started rummaging through her bag. She pulled out a mirror, a wallet, and a small paperback book before she found what she was looking for—a notebook and a purple pen.

Vega stared at the book. "Is that a book of crosswords?" she asked excitedly.

"It is," said Ella. "I do them on the subway." Then she got a horrified look on her face and barked out a laugh. "That was a joke! As if I ever take the subway! I do it in the car when my driver takes me to school."

"What's the subway?" asked Vega. *Starf!* she thought. *Maybe she'll realize I'm not a Wishling!*

But Ella grinned and reached over to give her a friendly punch in the arm. "Right? Nobody who goes to George Robert Prep actually takes the subway!"

Ella picked up a menu and began flipping through it. "I'm getting a hot fudge sundae with chocolate ice cream," she said decidedly.

The menu was so thick and jam-packed with unfamiliar food choices that Vega didn't know where to begin. Chops! Specials! Breakfast served all day! What in the world was a jelly omelet? Or a gyro? Vega was totally overwhelmed, so she simply said, "Me too." She hoped she would like it.

Shortly afterward she discovered that she most certainly did. The sundae, a tantalizing mountain of round scoops of brown, slathered with a thick dark brown sauce, was placed in front of her. A fluffy crown of white and a bright red fruit with a stem sat on top. It looked amazing. Vega licked her lips in anticipation.

"Let's dig in," said Ella, brandishing a long spoon.

The sundae was simply perfection in a chilly metal cup—a lip-smackingly delicious combination of creamy, sweet coldness and warm goodness in every bite. The white fluffy cream was sweet and as light as air. Vega was in heaven. She made a mental note: *Bring a hot fudge sundae home for Tessa.*

While they ate, Vega pulled the list of questions out of her backpack. She gave the stuffed blue star keychain a squeeze for luck. "Do you mind if I go first?" she asked Ella.

“Shoot,” said Ella.

“What?” asked Vega, totally confused.

Ella laughed. “Go ahead.”

“What is your greatest joy?” Vega asked her.

Ella bit her lip and stared into space. “I guess it’s being creative,” she said slowly. “Like I’ll show up for school in paint-splattered shoes or two different-colored socks, and the day after, one girl is doing it, and then the next week it’s five girls, and soon it’s a trend in the entire school. Even the older girls are copying my style.”

Vega wrote that all down. It was fun to write in a paper notebook with a writing utensil—very old-fashioned and extremely satisfying.

“What is your biggest dream for the future?” was the next question.

Vega looked up. Ella’s cheeks were flushed and she looked excited. It was the first time Vega had seen her look relaxed and unguarded.

“I’m going to be a fashion designer,” she said. “I’m going to create new fashions that no one has ever seen before. I’m going to come up with something people will be talking about forever, like the jumpsuit or the maxi dress.”

“Just like your mom,” said Vega.

Ella looked away. “Yeah, just like my mom.”

“And last but not least, what is your biggest fear?”

Ella stared into the distance. She opened her mouth, then closed it. “Um, my biggest fear is that everyone…”

Vega leaned forward. “Yes?”

“That everyone…” she thought for a moment and frowned. “That everyone…um, won’t like my fashions,” she concluded.

“That’s it?” asked Vega.

“That’s it,” Ella said firmly. “Now your turn.”

Vega, with some creative thinking and some serious self-editing, was able to answer the questions. She spoke about her dream of being a top student and her love of puzzles of all kinds. And all of a sudden she found herself explaining that her biggest fear was not making her mother proud of her, after she had worked so hard to provide for Vega. She had never put those thoughts into words, and she grew teary as she said them. When she looked up, she saw that Ella looked a bit tearful, too.

The two girls smiled at each other. “That was great,” said Ella. “I really learned a lot about you today.”

“Me too,” said Vega. “You’re a really interesting person.”

Ella checked her watch. “All right, well, I guess I had better go,” she said reluctantly.

“Oh, is your driver waiting?” Vega asked.

Ella got a funny look on her face, then nodded. “Yes, my driver is waiting. That’s right.” She grabbed the key pendant that hung around her neck, as if she was checking that it was there.

It’s now or never, Vega thought. “I know what your lie is,” she blurted out.

Ella bit her lip. “You do?” She didn’t look angry anymore, just sad and embarrassed.

“Your mom isn’t really in Paris,” Vega said.

Ella nodded. She looked ashamed but almost relieved.

“You don’t want her to come in for Bring Your Parents to School Day because you don’t want the other girls to pester her into making them fashions. You want to keep her creations all to yourself!” Vega concluded.

Ella stared at Vega, who sat back in the booth, feeling triumphant.

Then Ella stood up. “You couldn’t have it any more wrong if you tried,” she said. She threw some money on the table and stormed out of the coffee shop, the bell over the door tinkling cheerfully and adding a merry note to a decidedly unpleasant parting.

Vega watched her go, her heart sinking. She suddenly felt tired and cranky. She decided she would head to the school roof, where she would pitch her invisible tent. She glanced at her Star-Zap and accessed the Countdown Clock. Nineteen starhours and counting. *Starf!* She was running out of time. If she didn’t have Ella’s wish granted by the next day at noon, Leona wasn’t going to be the only Star Darling who didn’t collect any wish energy!

CHAPTER 8

“What are you doing here?” Vega asked.

When she had opened the flaps of her tent the next morning, she was shocked to see Clover standing at the edge of the roof, admiring the view.

Clover turned around, raised her eyebrow, and smirked at Vega. Her look said, *You know why I’m here.*

“I guess I already know,” said Vega with a sigh. “My mission is dangerously close to failing?”

“Your mission is dangerously close to failing,” confirmed Clover. She walked over to the tent, her arms folded tightly across her chest. “Spill it.”

So Vega did.



“There’s only one thing to do,” said Clover. “You’ve got to find her, figure out what she actually *did* lie about, and fix it, all in”—she checked Vega’s Countdown Clock—“four starhours.”

“I think I can do it,” said Vega. “I just need to get her alone. We started to have a connection yesterday….”

“Well, let’s find her right away,” said Clover. “You just have to keep thinking. Is there a detail that you missed…a small clue that will help us

figure it all out?"

The two girls left the roof and headed downstairs. They walked down the hallway to Ms. McKenney's classroom. When they got there, it was crowded with students and their parents, all of them buzzing with excitement. A doctor in a white lab coat was wheeling a human skeleton into the room. A book editor arrived with a stack of books to hand out. "Signed by the author!" bragged Luna.

"Hi, Vega," said Katie's dad. He took the stack of charts from under his arm and placed it on Katie's desk.

"This is going to be deadly," whispered Katie. "I can't watch!"

Vega grabbed her arm. "Where's Ella?" she asked.

"I overheard Ms. McKenney saying she wasn't coming in today," answered Katie. "I guess her mom didn't come back from Paris after all. What a disappointment."

Vega just stared at her. That was way more than a disappointment. That was a disaster!

Just then Callie and her mother rushed into the classroom. Callie's mom, who ran a modeling agency, was carrying a big shiny box filled with head shots. Callie looked repulsed. "You'll never believe it," she said. "We couldn't get a cab, so we had to take the *subway*."

"Ewwwww," said Lila. "My mother never lets me take the subway."

The subway…the subway… Why did that seem so familiar? All of a sudden Vega remembered her and Ella's words. "Is that a book of crosswords?" Vega had asked. And Ella had said, "It is. I do them on the subway."

And Ella's mom had not gone to Paris….And the key she wore around her neck…It wasn't the latest trend in necklaces—it was her house key! Her distressed boots? Well, it was quite possible they were just old.

"Oh, my stars," said Vega. "I had it all wrong. It's so simple. I'm such an idiot."

Clover grinned and opened her mouth as if she was about to say something.

"Don't you dare agree with me!" said Vega.

Clover just smiled.

"I'll explain it all on the way to Ella's house," said Vega. "But first I've got to find out where she lives!"

All she had to say was “You forgot to tell me what Ella’s address is,” to the school secretary, who handed it right over, no questions asked. Oh… there was *one*. It was “Are they serving German chocolate cake in the cafeteria today?”

Clover laughed. “So it’s true! We do smell like dessert!”

Vega looked down. Her wish energy was depleted. She stared at the address in her hand. There was no way around it. They were going to have to take the dreaded subway to get there.



“I don’t know what everyone is freaking out about,” said Clover as they sat in the subway car. The train rocked and shimmied as it sped through the underground tunnels.

“It gets you where you want to go pretty fast, it doesn’t cost a lot, and it provides free entertainment,” said Vega, listing the subway pros on her fingers. She pointed to a young man who had just finished playing his guitar and was walking through the car, offering people money from his hat.

“Thank you,” she said, removing one Wishling dollar. That was certainly generous of him!

He had a funny look on his face, but then he laughed. “Um, you’re welcome,” he said.

“So spill the stars,” said Clover, crossing her arms.

“I put it all together,” said Vega. “She takes the subway. She lives outside the city. She said her mother was not in Paris. Katie told me that some students at George Robert aren’t as wealthy as the others. Some kids get financial aid because the school costs so much. I’m pretty sure Ella’s lie was that she told everyone that her mother is a successful fashion designer. I think maybe business isn’t going very well and she doesn’t want everyone to find out about it, because it would embarrass her mom.”

The train emerged from the tunnel onto an elevated track.

Clover frowned. “You really think that’s it? So what’s her wish then?”

Vega thought hard for a moment. “She wishes that…she never said that about her mom?” Her brow furrowed. “But that’s an impossible wish.” She sighed. “This is all very confusing. I’m not sure how to fix this and time is running out.” She looked down at her Star-Zap. “And this is our stop.”

They exited the train car and found themselves on an open-air platform with a pretty mosaic sign. They headed downstairs, crossed a large boulevard, and headed straight down the block. There were fewer trees in that neighborhood and not as many flowers. Not as many people, either. Little Wishlings ran down the street and rode their tricycles while their caretakers watched, smiling.

Finally, they reached Ella's building—a solid brick fortress at the end of the block. Vega could see the tall skyscrapers of the city in the distance. Against the bright blue sky and soft fluffy clouds drifting by, it looked magical, like a fairy-tale city.

Vega used the last grains of her wish energy to push open the locked door. She and Clover rode the elevator in silence. They rang the buzzer for 6F.

No answer.

"I can't believe it!" said Vega. "Where is she? What are we going to do?"

The door swung open. Ella stood there, looking furious. "What are you doing here?" She looked at Clover. "And who is this?" she asked.

"This is my friend Clover," said Vega.

"Pleased to meet you," said Ella. "Nice boots."

"Thanks," said Clover, glancing down at her soft-brown fringed footwear.

Ella turned back to Vega, her mouth set in a thin, hard line. "Now get out of here," she said. "My mother is home. I don't want her to know what happened. She might think I'm embarrassed of her and that would kill me."

"I think I can help you," said Vega.

"No one can help me," retorted Ella. "I've gotten myself into this stupid mess and I don't know how to get out."

"You have to trust me," Vega said. "I'm here to help you." She smiled at Ella. "Sometimes when I'm feeling lost I say a special phrase to myself. I call it my mantra. And it helps me, it gives me strength. Do you want to say it with me?"

Ella rolled her eyes. But she gave a small smile and shrugged. "Sure," she said. "I've got nothing to lose."

Vega grasped Ella's hands in hers and recited her mantra: "You are the missing piece of the puzzle."

Ella gasped and stepped back. "How did you know?"

“I…um….” Vega stammered. How did she know what?

Ella grabbed Vega’s hand and pulled her inside the apartment. Clover was right behind her. The apartment was spotless, very cozy, and welcoming.

The small foyer had a tiny hand-painted table and a mosaic-framed mirror. In the living room was a massive red-and-gold-striped couch, a festive rug, and an antique chandelier hanging from the ceiling. The hallway that led to the kitchen and bedrooms had a dining room table and a china cabinet filled with vintage china in many different patterns. The sunny kitchen had fun antique signs advertising SARSAPARILLA: 5 CENTS A GLASS and FRESH EGGS. Ella took the girls into her neat bedroom, which had a stunning view of the city skyline.

“What a lovely place,” said Vega.

“Thanks,” said Ella. “On weekends my mom and I go to flea markets and thrift stores. We love to decorate.”

Then her face hardened. “I got myself into a real mess,” she said. “When I first got the scholarship to the school I was excited, but a little nervous that I wouldn’t fit in. But I decided I was going to just tell the truth. Then I met Katie and I really liked her. She asked what my parents did and I told her that my mother was a housekeeper for a famous fashion designer, and I guess Katie only heard the ‘famous fashion designer’ part. She told everyone, and I don’t know, I guess I liked the way it sounded. People were suddenly really nice to me. And then instead of correcting them, I let it go.”

Vega was confused. “Wait, so then who makes all your great clothes?”

Ella smiled and shrugged. And there in the corner was the answer—a sewing machine and a dress form with a half-made skirt on it.

“You really are the missing piece of the puzzle!” said Vega.

“Now you know,” said Ella. “I take old castaway clothes that my mother’s employer gives her and stuff I find at vintage stores and I redesign them into clothes for me.” She shook her head. “The girls at school are going to be angry when they realize that the clothes they were gushing over aren’t couture—just stuff I sewed together in my bedroom.” She looked at the ground. “Now I’ll be the laughingstock of the school.”

“You’ve got it all wrong, Ella,” said Vega. “The girls in school are going to be lining up to take lessons from you. It’s going to make your lie go away.”

“Really?” said Ella.

“Really,” said Vega. “You just have to trust me.”

CHAPTER 9

Vega had to convince the principal that George Robert Prep needed a forty-eighth club—Sewing and Fashion. She didn't want to do it the forceful way; she really wanted to convince the woman that it was a good idea, for Ella's sake. She told the principal the whole story, trying hard not to check her watch as she did it. There were mere starmins left.

"So all we need to do is borrow the PA system," said Vega. "Make a quick announcement. Two starm—I mean minutes, tops."

"This is highly irregular," said the principal. She sighed. "But I'll allow it." She headed back to her office. And as the door closed, Vega heard the principal ask her secretary, "Just who is that girl again?"



Ella cleared her throat. Her hand shook as she read the announcement that the three girls had cobbled together on the ride back to the city. "Hello, everyone. Ella Silverstone here. I have an exciting announcement to make. I know you all thought that my mother was the designer behind all my fashions, but it really was me!" She made a face like she was going to be sick, then soldiered on. "And guess what? I'm starting a new after-school club called Designing with Ella. We'll learn how to take old articles of

clothing and transform them into fashions that are completely unique and one of a kind. I have room for twenty students and it is first come, first served. See you this afternoon in room 228."

She shut off the intercom. "First come, first served," she said with a shudder. "Why did I say that?"

The end-of-the-day bell rang and the three girls could hear the students running down the hallways, anxious to get outside. "Do you think anyone is going to show up?" Ella asked.

"I do," said Vega. *I hope,* she thought.

They stood, and Vega and Clover each picked up a box filled with old clothing and fabric scraps Ella had brought. Ella hoisted her sewing machine and they headed up the stairs.

The woman with the clipboard sat behind the table. She looked at them expectantly.

"We're going to Designing with Ella," said Vega.

"Never heard of it," said the woman.

"It's in room 228," said Ella. "It's a new club."

The woman waved them through.

Standing in front of the door, Ella took a deep breath. Then she opened the door.

"Oh," she said softly.

Vega peeked over her shoulder. The room was full of girls all eager to join Ella's club.

"Pick me, pick me!" a girl said. "I love fashion."

"Ella!" said another. "I loaned you my history notes last week, you owe me one!"

Ella looked around the room, a grin spreading across her face.

"Ella!" Luna shouted. "Is your mom coming today?"

Ella took a deep breath. "No," she said. "She isn't coming. I have to tell you the truth. My mom actually isn't a fashion designer. I made all the clothes myself."

Katie pushed to the front of the room. "Who cares?" she said. "That doesn't matter. All we want is to make clothes just like you."

"That's right!" said Luna. "So, am I in?"

Vega gasped as an incredible shower of multicolored sparkles rose from Ella and bounced around the room. She turned and caught Clover's shocked

expression. “It’s so beautiful!” she breathed. Ella’s wish—for her lie to go away—had come true.

Ella turned to Vega and Clover. She looked stunned, tearful, and very happy, all at the same time. “Thank you,” she said. “I can’t believe it. My wish has come true.”

“Believe it,” said Vega.

Epilogue

Vega stood in front of Lady Stella's office door, collecting herself. She tried to make her face look serious, but she was so proud and so excited that it was impossible to stop smiling. Mindful of Leona's feelings, she managed to dim the wattage of her grin, at least a little bit. Nope, there it was again.

Her mission had not been easy. She had misinterpreted it and had a difficult time figuring it out. She had almost completely alienated her Wisher. She was especially grateful to Clover. She knew she wouldn't have collected the wish energy without her help.

Just as she raised her hand to knock on the door, she reached into her pocket and stole a glance at her Star-Zap. The red star around the image of her mother's face was still there, a visible reminder of what a terrible daughter she had been. She resolved to call her mother on the way back to the dorm that evening. She'd make a plan for a visit home for certain.

Vega placed the Star-Zap back in her pocket, adjusted her collar, and knocked on the door. It slid open. The moment she stepped into the room, everyone jumped to their feet and started cheering. She stood there, grinning and feeling proud, slightly embarrassed, and totally wonderful. She'd had no idea that a standing ovation could feel quite so good. Even Leona was cheering.

When the excitement died down, Lady Stella called Vega forward and handed her the orb. It felt warm and substantial in her hand, and she liked the weight of it. It started to glow so brightly Vega wished she had on her safety starglasses. Then, before her eyes, it began to transform into a

flower: first a stem sprouted; then the orb itself was surrounded with petals—deep blue giving way to icy blue. "It's a bluebubble," Vega breathed. "My favorite flower of all." Glowing points of light orbited the blossom. "The petals open and close so regularly you can use it to tell time," she told the others proudly.

Vega was even more delighted when her Power Crystal, a gorgeous queezle, emerged. It was stunning! Sparkling crystalline blue nuggets were held together by their own internal magnetic force. Vega held it up and took a closer look. "Is it…is it Eleanor's Equation?" she asked Lady Stella in disbelief.

The headmistress nodded in affirmation. "Yes," she said. She turned to the others. "The nuggets may seem to be arranged chaotically," she explained. "But they actually represent a precise mathematical equation."

Lady Stella took the flower, which was beginning to transform into a Silver Blossom, and placed it on her desk.

Clover shook her head. "I was only there to help," she said. But Vega could tell that she was pleased.

To her chagrin, Vega noticed that Leona looked away and Ophelia gave her a quick, supportive hug. This couldn't be easy on her.

Just then Vega remembered something. She had made a quick stop at the diner just before she left for home. "Tessa, don't think I wasn't listening," she said. "I brought you back something chocolate—a hot fudge sundae!"

Tessa clapped her hands. "Startastic!" she said.

Vega reached into her backpack, pulled out the paper bag, and handed it to Tessa. Everyone oohed as it made a rustling sound. Licking her lips in anticipation, Tessa reached in and pulled out the container and a pink plastic spoon. Libby grabbed for it, admiring the color.

Tessa lifted the lid. "Ta-da!" she said.

Everyone stared at the sloppy brown mess inside.

"You brought me soup?" Tessa asked.

"Now you know," Lady Stella said with a tinkling laugh. "Wishling food…often requires refrigeration!"

Vega laughed. "Here's my last Wishworld observation—ice cream melts!"



Vega pressed the END HOLO-CALL button on her Star-Zap. Why wasn't her mother answering? Was she mad at Vega for taking so long to call back? That seemed very unlike her. But Vega still felt a tiny bit worried. Her mission had opened her eyes to a lot of things, including the importance of being proud of where you came from. She wanted to call her mom and hear her voice and tell her she loved her and was grateful for all the sacrifices she had made. Ella had helped Vega see all that, and she felt that the mission had been eye-opening for them both.

She yawned. She was so sleepy! Traveling to Wishworld and granting a Wisher's wish had certainly taken a lot of energy out of her! She didn't feel like moving her feet, so she willed the Cosmic Transporter to pick up the pace. The sooner she was under the covers, the better. It didn't work, of course.

It seemed like the slowest journey to her dorm room ever. Finally, she stood in front of her door and placed her hand on the scanner. "Welcome home, Vega," said the Bot-Bot voice. "And congratulations on a job well done!"

"Star salutations," Vega said automatically. She stepped inside the dark room and stopped in her tracks. She had been away only a couple of stardays, but she suddenly realized how homesick she had been. She placed her hand on her pride and joy—a large, beautiful secretary desk that had belonged to her great-grandmother on her mother's side. It had a curved top that rolled up and down like a dream (despite its age) and dozens of perfectly labeled drawers and nooks inside. Vega's mother told her that her great-grandmother had been just as organized and precise as she.

She placed her Star-Zap on top of the desk.

"You remind me so much of her sometimes," said someone with a familiar voice. Vega spun around. The room seemed empty. Was she hearing things?

She gasped as a figure stepped out of the shadows. Vega recognized who it was immediately and raced across the room, then fell into outstretched arms. She inhaled the comforting and oh-so-familiar smell of gossamer perfume, boingtree needles, and hospital disinfectant.

"Oh, Mama," she said. "I'm so happy to see you. But how…"

"Piper called me and suggested I come for a visit," she said. "And I'm so glad she did. I've missed you so much, starshine."

Tears filled Vega's eyes as she heard her childhood nickname. She concentrated her wish manipulation energy and the light switched on. She looked up and saw the tiny crinkles around her mother's violet eyes, the curve of her chin, her striking cheekbones. Her mother's thin, graceful hands, equally capable of holding a child's hand and lifting a heavy patient, stroked her blue hair. That was what Vega had been missing. The empty space she had been feeling was filled.



Vega lay in bed, content. Her mission had been a resounding success, both for her and for her Wisher. She and her mom had parted with big hugs and a plan to spend the upcoming holiday relaxing and playing games together. She sighed with happiness.

Just then her Star-Zap buzzed. She was so sleepy she considered ignoring it, but her curiosity got the better of her and she reached out for it.

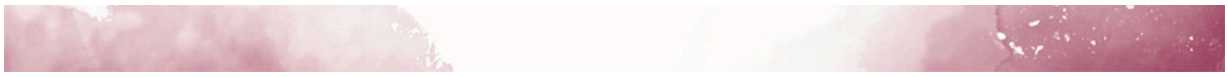
Sure it had been strange to have to say "Not much" when her mother had asked her what she had been up to lately. Only the most incredible adventure of her entire life, that's all! And it had been so tempting to brag (a little) about how she had saved her Wish Mission, just in the nick of time. To say nothing about the Wish Blossom and Power Crystal she had just received. It had been hard to dim the wattage of her huge smile when that happened, but she managed to tone it down a bit, for Leona's sake. Vega would have liked nothing better than to have been able to pull the Power Crystal out of her bag and show it to her mother. She sighed. Maybe someday…She pressed a button and a holo-text appeared in front of her.

She read it, read it again, and then gasped. Piper murmured in her sleep but didn't wake up. Vega read the holo-text again to make sure she wasn't mistaken. But there it was, clear as day: MEET ME IN THE HEDGE MAZE TOMORROW. WE NEED TO TALK. SCARLET.

Scarlet Discovers True Strength

Shana Muldoon Zappa and Ahmet Zappa
with Zelda Rose

Disney Press
Los Angeles • New York



Prologue

“So you’re saying Vega heard from her?”

“Cross my stars. A holo-text. She got it last night.”

“Well, what did it say? Where has she been this whole time? Is she in Starland City? Did she run away?”

Scarlet recognized the Star Darlings’ voices outside her window immediately. She didn’t have to peer down, but she did. She could also tell right away that they were talking about her. *How dare they?* was all she could think.

Scarlet was perched up in the loft of her dorm room—her *new* dorm room—a place that, these stardays, she seldom left. It had all happened so fast it still felt like yesterday: Lady Stella’s informing her that her being assigned to the Star Darlings was all a “starmendous and most unfortunate” mistake, and that, as a result, she would need to be reassigned to a new dorm room so her replacement—some meek-looking orange-haired first-year student—could move into hers. At first, Scarlet had looked at that, at least, as the silver lining, since she and her roommate, Leona, had been bickering. But it didn’t take long for her to realize that there would never, in a moonium staryears, be any silver linings to the cloud she had found herself in.

“It didn’t say where Scarlet’s been, unfortunately.” That tinkly voice belonged to Cassie. Scarlet gazed down at the top of the first-year student’s

silver-white pigtailed head. She and her roommate, Sage, were walking along the path between their Little Dipper Dorm building and the Big Dipper Dorm, where third and fourth years, like Scarlet, lived. Scarlet couldn't help smiling as she thought how clueless they were; she was right there, just two floors above them, and they had no idea. "All the holo-text said," Cassie went on, "was for Vega to meet her in the hedge maze…which makes me wonder if Scarlet's still here at school…."

Sage tossed her long lavender hair dramatically from one shoulder to the other, a habit that had always made Scarlet roll her eyes. "I don't know," Sage said. "If Scarlet was at school, don't you think she'd go to classes? I mean, she's already been kicked out of the Star Darlings. Does she want to get kicked out of school, too?"

Kicked out! She nearly leaned out to yell, "I was not *kicked out*!"

"She wasn't kicked out…" said Cassie.

Thank you! thought Scarlet. Cassie always had seemed a little smarter than the rest.

"…exactly. I mean, she didn't do anything wrong."

"Mistakes happen, I guess," Sage said. She shrugged and re-tossed her hair.

*Mistakes…*thought Scarlet. *Mistakes?* Accidently using your roommate's toothlight was a *mistake*. Being told that you, in fact, weren't Star Darlings material? That wasn't a *mistake*. It was just plain wrong!

"I don't know…." Below, Cassie slowed to a stop, pulling Sage with her. Their arms were linked, as Starling arms usually were when they walked together.

"What?" said Sage.

"It's just…so many strange things are going on. There's poor Leona… ruining her Wish Pendant and not getting a Power Crystal when her mission was otherwise such a success."

"Well, wasn't that her fault? She never used her special powers."

"I know…but to ruin your Wish Pendant?" Cassie shook her head.

Above, Scarlet nodded sympathetically. Leona's ruined Wish Pendant didn't come close, of course, to Scarlet's losing her place as a Star Darling, but it had to hurt.

"And then, of course, there are those flowers," Cassie went on. "Have you noticed, by the way, that we aren't fighting anymore?"

“Oh, Cassie!” A laugh bubbled out of Sage as she started to pull Cassie forward. “You and your conspiracy theories. You are too cute! Really, you are.”

CHAPTER 1

"Hellooooo?"

Scarlet turned from the window at the sound of a reedy, shrill voice calling from below. She slid from the window seat and peered down the stairs. "Who's there?" she said cautiously, not sure she wanted to know.

As she started down the curving ladder, a Starling came into view. It was a woman—an old woman, Scarlet could tell immediately—grinning and bent over a crystal-tipped cane.

"Hello?" Scarlet said. Her eyes swept the room uneasily for a glimpse of her roommate, Mira. "Er, excuse me," she said, not finding her, "but how did you get in?" Usually, Scarlet was the one sneaking up on people, not the other way around. Plus, as far as she knew, the only way to open the door was by using the palm scanner outside. Then it had to approve you. So how did the woman get in? "Er…can I help you?"

The little old Starling craned her neck to peer up at Scarlet. "Why, hello, and star salutations, dearie," she said sweetly. Her voice cracked with age. Wire-rimmed star-shaped glasses rested halfway down her nose, and silvery lilac curls framed her pinched but pleasant face. "As a matter of fact, you can. I'm looking for my granddaughter, Mira. The Bot-Bot guard at the front told me this was her room?"

“Oh…” That made a little more sense. Scarlet guessed family members’ hands must work on the palm scanners, too. Not that she would know. After two and a half staryears at Starling Academy, her own family had still never visited her, not once. The only time Scarlet saw her parents was when she met them on tour. They were classical musicians and composers, famous throughout Starland for their otherworldly sounds and scores. Scarlet’s mother played the halo-harp, her father the violin, and they traveled staryear-round throughout Starland, recording holo-albums and selling out the most prestigious concert halls. Even when they played in Starland City, Starland’s capital and the home of Starling Academy, rehearsals and interviews kept them so busy that Scarlet always had to go to them. Their schedules were simply too full to fit in a visit to the school.

Growing up, Scarlet had toured Starland with her parents, living out of suitcases, staying in five-star hotels. In between shows, her mother or father —depending on whose turn it was—would tutor her backstage as they tuned their precious instruments. By the time she had reached the Age of Fulfillment, Scarlet had met every dignitary on Starland—but not many other kids.

Scarlet’s parents were naturally proud and not surprised when she showed an interest in music. They were astonished, however, when she chose to play the *drums* and began to wear a lot of black. At first, she’d just wanted to shock and annoy them and rebel against their stodgy ways. And she succeeded—particularly when she started adding black streaks to her hot-pink hair. Soon, though, she found herself loving the drums and her adopted color, too. Both made her feel strong. Both let her show her feelings without having to say a single word.

Still, Scarlet needed more. She needed a life that was truly her own, which was why she had applied to Starling Academy. She was stunned when she got in and sure she would struggle in her classes, but she found they were easy for her. The only things that were hard were fitting in and making friends.

“What’s the matter, dearie?” The elder Starling chuckled. “Glowfur got your tongue?”

“Oh…star apologies,” Scarlet said quickly. She was suddenly aware that she probably seemed rude. “Uh, yes. Yes, this is Mira’s room. But, well…” She looked around and shrugged. “She’s not here.”

“Oh, what a pity!” The woman’s face folded into a pained expression, like one of those comedy/tragedy masks that hung over Mira’s bed. She sighed and shook her head slowly. “Well. I suppose I’ll just wait for her, then. I should have told her I was coming. Hopefully she won’t be long.” She shuffled across the room, smiling sweetly and looking ever so slightly confused. “Please do forgive me for surprising you. I didn’t realize she had a roommate, you see. I could have sworn the last time she wrote to me she said she lived alone.”

“She did,” said Scarlet. “I just moved in.” She tried to sound less bitter than she felt.

“Ah, good!” said the old woman. “Glad to know I wasn’t wrong.” She tapped her head just above her ear. “Two thousand and three and still sharp as a prism. So what’s your name, my dear?”

“It’s, um, Scarlet.”

“Scarlet! How lovely! We had a glowsow on the farm with that name when I was a girl. So!” She crossed the star-trimmed corners of her shawl. “Just moved in, you say. Does that mean you’re new?”

“No, ma’am…” Scarlet shook her head and turned back to her loft, longing to climb back up. She was usually so glad her new roommate, Mira, was always at “play rehearsal,” or whatever that drama stuff she loved so much was. For once, though, Scarlet wished she would hurry back to their room so her grandmother would have someone else to talk to.

The old woman, meanwhile, settled onto the bench in front of Mira’s dressing table with a frail yet eager sigh. She took a moment to catch her breath and take in Scarlet’s side of the wide, softly lit room. Her eyes lingered on the hot-pink drum set perched on a raised platform across from Scarlet’s black-and-fuschia-covered bed. Scarlet’s things had been moved for her the same starday Lady Stella had broken the news. When her Star-Zap finally led her to her newly assigned room on the other side of the Big Dipper Dorm, it wasn’t clear who was more put out: Mira, who’d been quite content having a single, or Scarlet herself.

“Are those drums?” asked the old woman, pointing.

Scarlet nodded. What else would they be?

“Ooh! What fun! Can I try them?” She was already out of her seat. She hobbled over to the platform, raised her cane, and gave the cymbal a powerful smack.

CRASHHH!

“Don’t! *Stop!*” Scarlet cried, hurrying over. “I mean, I’d rather you didn’t, um, please.” Scarlet didn’t want to be rude, but nobody—not even a little old Starling—was touching her precious drums. “Maybe you’d be more comfortable waiting for Mira in the Illumination Library. I’m sure a Bot-Bot guide could show you the way.”

“Oh, starry nights, no.” The old woman grinned and set her cane back on the polished star-studded floor. “I’m just as comfortable as can be. Where is my lovely granddaughter, though, do you know? I’m just as eager to see her as I can be.”

Scarlet didn’t know, though she wanted to be helpful. If Mira had ever said anything to her about where she was going, Scarlet was too focused on her Star Darlings problem to care. Besides, Scarlet preferred for other Starlings to keep their noses out of her business, so she tried to set an example by keeping her nose to herself, too.

“I’m not sure…maybe play rehearsal?”

“Oh, yes, you’re right, I’m sure!” crowed the old woman. “That Mira is quite an actor! Destined for stardom! Don’t you think?”

“Is she? I don’t know,” Scarlet confessed. “I’ve never seen her act.” Since leaving her parents to attend Starling Academy, she’d tried to steer clear of theaters and auditoriums. Quite frankly, she also had yet to see the appeal in running around, dressed up like a fool, pretending to be somebody else.

“Moon and stars!” Mira’s grandmother gasped. “Never? What a shame. Oh, but surely you’ve seen her act *sometime*….”

Scarlet shook her head. “Star apologies. No.”

“Never?” The old woman leaned forward, twisting slightly. The corners of her mouth twitched, one at a time. A bluish star-shaped freckle on her cheek began to sparkle. Scarlet watched it closely, the familiarity clicking at last. How hadn’t she noticed it before?

“All right, I’ll admit it.” Scarlet sighed to hold back a groan. “I saw her once.”

“Really? You did see her? When?”

“The Time of Shadows production. Our first year at school.”

“Oh, that was a good one!”

Scarlet stifled a smile as she clicked her tongue and slowly shook her head.

"It wasn't?" The woman's blue eyes grew round. "You really don't think so? Why not?"

"Well, some parts were good…like the scenery….And the props could have been worse."

"What about the acting?" croaked the old woman.

Scarlet looked down and smiled.

"*Well?*" Mira's "grandmother" waited, tapping her cane against the floor, sending sparks into the air. "Wasn't it good? Of course it was! We got a standing ovation at the end!"

"*We?*" Scarlet glanced back up, raising one eyebrow in a sharp arch.

The old woman threw back her head. "*Starf!* You knew it was me!" she groaned. Then she laughed and tossed off her shawl so it dangled behind her. "Tell me I had you going there for a while, though," Mira said as she pulled off her wig. Her long indigo hair spilled down her back in shimmering waves. Beneath a thick layer of stage makeup, a whole galaxy of bright blue freckles flashed like sunlight on a lake.

"For a starmin," muttered Scarlet. She did have to live with her, after all.

"Really? Is that all?" Mira sighed. "Sunspots. I guess that's why you're not in that remedial group anymore." She grinned at Scarlet—then blanched in the heat of Scarlet's simmering glare. "No offense!" she said quickly. Like everyone at Starling Academy, it seemed, Mira assumed the special class the Star Darlings went to last period was for extra help so they didn't fail out of school. "Star apologies. I just thought…you know…since it was a mistake and all…"

"It was a mistake, all right," hissed Scarlet.

"Are you mad?"

Am I mad? thought Scarlet. Did a glowfur eat Green Globules? She was mad, all right. Madder than Leona when she'd had to try out for her own band!

Suddenly, Scarlet's Star-Zap beeped. A holo-text was coming in.

She read it: IN THE HEDGE MAZE. R U STILL COMING?

It was Vega, waiting to meet.

"Forget about it. I'll be fine," Scarlet snapped as she climbed off her bed.

She'd be perfectly *startacular*…just as soon as she set everything straight again.

CHAPTER 2

Scarlet burst out of the Big Dipper Dorm and hopped onto the Cosmic transporter. She passed the dancing fountain as she headed to the hedge maze, ignoring the water's friendly wave. She knew all too well that once encouraged, the fountain would only work harder to try to keep a Starling there.

The campus was quiet, as it often was after dinner, when most students flocked to the Lightning Lounge. That was a place, though, that Scarlet usually avoided. Everyone was far too sociable and eager to hang out and chat. One couldn't even lie back and gaze at the stars from underneath the retractable roof without some shiny Starling leaning over and saying, "Ooh! Aren't they pretty?" or "Do you think they look the same from Wishworld?" Scarlet's jaw ached from holding back rude responses, like "*No*, they look like globerbeems from Wishworld. What a startacularly silly question! Of course they look the same!"

Scarlet didn't care much for the hedge maze, either—for a different reason. The hedge maze drove her crazy, the way its pattern constantly changed. No sooner would she think she'd found a way out than a path would turn, a wall would shift, or a leafy new hedge would suddenly appear. Where the fun in *that* was, Scarlet had no idea. She thanked her stars for the single red blossom in every hedge wall that would open a door

when plucked. She plucked one every time. Vega, on the other hand, would never have dreamed of doing such a thing. She loved the maze and spent more time there than all the other Star Darlings combined, so it was the best place Scarlet could think of to get a few words with her—alone.

Even before she spotted Vega, Scarlet saw her sapphire aura. The constantly changing maze, however, made actually reaching her hard.

"Vega!" Scarlet finally shouted through the glittery hedge wall. "I'm over here! Come! Hurry up!"

Vega was beside her in a starsec, only slightly out of breath.

"How did you get here so fast?" asked Scarlet as a new wall of hedge popped up behind Vega.

"Easy," Vega said. "I waited for the hedge to shift left, then ran south ten degrees, then doubled back through the—"

Scarlet held up her hands. "That's all right. Never mind. I don't care." At the same time, though, it was exactly this love of puzzle solving that gave Scarlet hope that Vega could help.

"So what did you want to talk about—*finally*? It's good to see you, by the way. Where in the universe have you *been*? We've been worried about you for stardays. So…did you want to hear about my mission?" Vega smiled proudly, ignoring Scarlet's immediate sneer. "You'll be happy to know that—unlike Leona's…" Vega sighed. "Poor thing. Anyway, unlike Leona's mission, mine was a *great* success. Another Power Crystal collected! Not that I didn't have a little issue—but everyone does, it seems. I found my Wisher fairly easily. It's the wish *identifying* that's so tricky. I know they always tell us that, but you don't really know until you try. Luckily, Clover came down and helped me figure it out in plenty of time. It was actually quite an interesting wish…." She paused, finally noticing Scarlet's pained expression.

"Really, Vega? Do you truly think I wanted to meet to hear all about a Star Darlings mission when I can't go on one anymore?" Scarlet shook her head and her black hair swung back and forth across her eyes. "I thought you were smarter than that. That's about the *last* thing I want to talk about."

"Of course!" said Vega. "What was I thinking? Star apologies." She reached out to pat Scarlet's shoulder, but Scarlet shrank away. "So then… what is it? Oh!" Vega nodded. "It's the *band*! You want to come back. That's startastic!" She clapped. "We need you! We really do! Clover was filling in, but she couldn't take Leona anymore. Not that *you* should worry

about her. Yes, she's mad that you dropped out, but she also knows what a starmendous drummer you are."

"Freakin' fireballs," Scarlet groaned. "The band is the *second*-to-last thing on my mind!" Sure, she missed the band—well, she missed playing the drums—but she definitely wasn't ready to go back to it, and she wasn't sure she ever would be. Of course Vega, who played the bass, was fine. And Sage and Libby were okay, too. Sage wasn't the best guitarist, but she had good instincts and worked to improve. Libby tried way too hard to make everyone happy, in Scarlet's opinion, but she was startastic on the keytar. It was Leona who drove everyone crazy by bossing them around. Frankly, Scarlet was surprised she didn't try to play every instrument herself.

"Then *what*?" said Vega. Under her bangs her forehead wrinkled. For Vega, the only feeling worse than having the incorrect answer was not having an answer at all.

"Something's wrong. Very wrong," said Scarlet.

"Ah." Vega nodded. "I see. I know. You're right. It's so unfair. It really is. And I'd feel exactly the same if I were you, I'm sure."

"What? *No!*" Scarlet scooted out from under Vega's hand again. "I mean, yes. It's unfair. Of course. But it's unfair because it's a huge mistake. That new girl—Ophelia, or whatever her name is—should never have been picked to take my place!"

"You don't think so?"

"I do not!"

Vega sighed and crossed her arms. "Truth be told, you could be right. I've been wondering about her myself."

"You have?"

Vega nodded. "She's so far behind in Star Darlings class—which made sense in the beginning. No one expected her to know anything yet. But she's just not catching up. Do you know she still can't manipulate a watt of energy? Not a single watt! Ooh!" She suddenly jumped as a branch reached out to tickle her ribs. "Come on, we should keep moving," she told Scarlet. "The maze doesn't like it when you stop."

Vega moved to link her arm with Scarlet's. But Scarlet had never been the touchy-feely, arm-linking, hand-holding type. Instead, she put her hands behind her back as they moved along the ever-twisting starlit path.

"You know," said Vega, sensing Scarlet's impatience with their route, "if you just focus and look for a pattern, you have a much better chance of

making it out. It's when you try to fight it that you end up feeling trapped."

"Whatever," said Scarlet. "Just get me out of here."

So Vega linked arms with Scarlet (despite her protests) and they quickly made their way out of the maze.

"Star apologies," said Scarlet, "but I just can't play peekaboo with a bush and think at the same time. You're good at solving puzzles, Vega. I've never had patience for them. So think: why would someone so new and totally unprepared to grant wishes be picked to take my place when my wish-granting potential's so starmendously high?"

"You're right. I do like puzzles…" said Vega. "At the same time, though, this was Lady Stella's decision, and we have to trust her, don't you think? Still…" She paused. "It is strange." Scarlet could sense that an idea was being born in Vega's mind. "And if you talked to Cassie, she'd tell you that's not the only strange thing going on."

"I know," said Scarlet.

"You do?"

Scarlet shrugged and scowled. "I might have…overheard her…talking about me, and Leona's Wish Pendant."

"And the whole flower thing?" Vega's bright blue eyebrows shot up.

"She did say something about flowers…but I didn't actually get that part. What flowers was she talking about?"

"The bouquets," said Vega. "You know. The ones we all—all the Star Darlings, I mean—had delivered to our rooms?"

"Oh, those." Scarlet nodded. She did remember, though she hadn't thought it strange at the time. "So you still don't know who they're from?"

"No," Vega said, "but that's not even it. Cassie has this crazy idea that they were making us fight with each other over the littlest things. In fact, she's so sure, she took my bouquet to the botany lab to be evaluated. She'd already thrown hers and Sage's away."

"What do *you* think?" Scarlet asked. "Do you think Cassie might be right?"

Vega smoothed her hair back. "No, I don't. In fact, we made a bet. If I was right, she would do a puzzle with me every day for a double starweek."

"And if she was right?"

"I'd help her study for her Astral Accounting test."

Scarlet frowned.

Vega winked. “I know. Win-win. But I’m not too concerned about helping her study. Piper’s still annoying me as much as ever. She makes these sounds when she’s meditating….” Vega closed her eyes and cringed. “Ugh! I can hear them all the way from upstairs in her part of the room. It sounds like a Bot-Bot on the fritz. Like this high, whiny *ohmmmm*.” She winced. “How about you and Leona?” she asked Scarlet. “How were you getting along? Before you switched rooms, I mean.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Leona and I had our testy moments….” Scarlet shrugged. “But I’m sure we would have anyway. So what did the botany lab say?”

“Nothing…*yet*. But we should probably hear soon.”

“Promise to tell me when you do.”

Vega drew an X over her heart. “Cross my stars—and moons. But… how? I mean, when will I see you again? Where have you been all this time?”

“I’ve been…around,” said Scarlet vaguely. “They gave me a new roommate. Her name’s Mira.”

“I don’t know her,” said Vega.

“Neither did I.”

“Is she nice?”

“She’s fine,” said Scarlet. “We don’t really know each other yet. She isn’t around that much, and I pretty much stay in my loft all the time, so maybe we never will….”

“Have you been to any classes since…”

“No,” said Scarlet bitterly.

“Don’t you think you should?” Vega gently asked. “I mean, I can understand dropping out of Leona’s band. No one—well, except Leona maybe—blames you for that. But even if you’re not in the Star Darlings anymore, you’re still a student at the school, and you can still go to Wishworld and grant wishes one day…but only if you graduate, of course.”

Scarlet looked over her shoulder, past the hedge maze, toward the majestic Crystal Mountains, which glimmered across Luminous Lake. Vega was right, she guessed. Not that Scarlet was worried about falling behind in any subjects. Her classes seemed to get easier for her every year. But hiding from everyone and everything, while it made life simpler right then, wasn’t helping her solve her problem, either.

“You can’t hide forever,” Vega went on, almost as if she’d peeked into Scarlet’s mind. “How about I make you a deal like I made with Cassie?”

“I don’t make deals,” muttered Scarlet. “But what?”

“You start going to your classes, and I’ll do whatever I can to help you get to the bottom of what went wrong.”

CHAPTER 3

The next day, Scarlet went through the motions of going to morning assembly, classes, meals…all the things she was *supposed* to do. But the more she tried to act like everything was normal, the surer she was that everything was wrong.

She didn't even try to move all the desks in Wishful Thinking class, and yet with a single eyebrow raise she did exactly that. She was just as surprised as everyone else when it happened but was determined as always not to let her emotions show.

Even Professor Dolores Raye's mouth fell open. "Who did that?" she gasped.

In the far corner of the room, Scarlet slowly raised her hand.

"Oh, my stars!" said Professor Raye. "I didn't even see you back there, Scarlet. Welcome back to class, by the way. I must say, I've never seen such control in a third year. Those are very special powers. Er…now, if you don't mind, would you be so kind as to move the desks back to where they were?"

This only confirmed something Scarlet had already begun to sense: somehow, instead of feeling less special since leaving the Star Darlings, she felt as if her wish energy powers were stronger than ever before.

At lunch, Scarlet managed to sit by herself: no small feat in the Celestial Café. The tables were large and round and designed to encourage Starlings to linger and talk for starhours. Scarlet sequestered herself at an empty corner table, where she promptly spilled her mug of Zing. "Forget it," she told the Bot-Bot waiter who appeared instantly with another as the puddle disappeared. Instead, she ordered a steaming bowl of stewed garble greens—the smell of which was guaranteed to keep other Starlings far away.

Rather than eating, though—she *hated* garble greens—Scarlet observed the Star Darlings from afar. They sat together, as they had since they'd been summoned, at the middle table near the window overlooking Luminous Lake. Astra was dressed in her neon-trimmed fiery-red star ball uniform. It could have been a game day or not. With her, you never knew. Cassie was nose-deep in a holo-book, and Gemma was giggling and prattling away. Listening to Gemma was one thing Scarlet did not miss in the least.

Vega noticed her and waved so that the others couldn't see. She flashed Scarlet a sparkly smile of friendly encouragement, which Scarlet accepted reluctantly.

As she watched them all, Scarlet couldn't help remembering what Vega had told her in the maze about roommates bickering. And, indeed, they were. If they weren't barking at or arguing with each other, they were sitting far enough apart that they didn't have to talk. Cassie and Sage were the only roommates who appeared to be enjoying each other's company—and Leona and Ophelia, who were sharing a glimmerberry shake.

What a dud, thought Scarlet as she studied Ophelia. There was nothing at all best or brightest or star-charmed about her—at least from what Scarlet could see. While the Starlings around her radiated confidence, brilliance, and power, Ophelia gave off an awkward, muddled aura of confusion and fear.

So why was she there instead of Scarlet? Instead of *anyone*, really…but especially Scarlet.

Scarlet remembered the explanation Lady Stella had given when the headmistress had delivered the shocking news.

"I'm truly sorry, Scarlet. Star apologies don't begin to express how I feel. But accidents happen, even on Starland, and I'm afraid one has occurred here. As you know, I chose the twelve Star Darlings myself, using an intricate algorithm comprising numerous factors, including grades and test scores and energy records."

"Yes?" Scarlet had said. She could tell something grave was coming, but she had no idea what on Starland it could be.

"Naturally, great care was taken with the data, and yet…somehow, somewhere, a glitch occurred along the way…and your name, most unfortunately, was given to me in error."

"I don't understand…" Scarlet had whispered with what little breath she could find in her chest.

"I must say, I don't, either. And yet the holo-records Lady Cordial has shown me are as clear as the night sky. Your scores and those of another Starling, Ophelia, were mixed up in the holo-files. Therefore, *she* is the rightful twelfth Star Darling—something you, Scarlet, were never truly meant to be."

Naturally, Scarlet had argued—vehemently. But the energy had been spent in vain. She left Lady Stella's office stinging, as if a hive of angry glitterbees had attacked her, and the feeling still hadn't gone away. The black hole Scarlet had felt in her stomach at that moment was still there, just as deep. In fact, sitting in the Celestial Café, watching Ophelia in her place among the other Star Darlings, only made the feeling worse. Scarlet knew her grades and scores were strong, so the whole thing already made no sense. But in what crazy parallel universe could a starling such as Ophelia have one score higher than Scarlet's, let alone a whole file's worth?

Scarlet blinked and slid her now cold bowl of garble greens across the table before standing up and leaving the café. She had Lighterature next period, but she didn't care. The thought of sitting in a class full of happy, carefree Starlings made her want to zap something. Besides, they were reading a tragedy by Shakestar that she had read hydrongs of times—*Romea and Jupiter*. The whole star-crossed romance thing made her want to hurl. So when she left the Celestial Café, she turned away from Halo Hall and headed across the Star Quad, straight back to the Big Dipper Dorm.

The building was empty except for the Bot-Bot guard inside the front door. "Star greetings, Scarlet," it welcomed her.

"Star greetings," she muttered back.

Scarlet stepped onto the Cosmic Transporter as it rolled through the halls.

Outside her door, Scarlet placed her hand on the palm scanner. The door opened with a gentle *whoosh.* As she walked in, the door slid smoothly closed. Scarlet scrunched her eyes to dim the lights and gazed around the

room. Her eyes fell on her drum kit on its platform. *Yes!* That was just what she needed to do! Bang out a few dark and angry riffs…or maybe a few hydrong.

Scarlet hadn't played the drums much at all since she'd left the Star Darlings. Before that, she'd played hours every day—either with Leona's band or in their old room while Leona sang. They found it was the one thing they could do together without getting on each other's nerves. As soon as Lady Stella told her she was out of the Star Darlings, however, Scarlet stopped going to band practice, too. Every other member was still a Star Darling, and the last thing she needed was to hear them talk about their missions—or deal with their pity or, worse, their phony good cheer. The only place she could play was her room, but lately the inspiration just hadn't been there.

That day, she felt different, though. The drums seemed to be calling to her. She grabbed her sticks and climbed the platform and sat down. She waited a moogle for the stool to adjust itself beneath her, then gave her bass drum pedal three fierce stomps: *BAM! BAM! BAM!* The energy in the room flickered and rolled away from the star-shaped drum pad in powerful glittery waves. Scarlet smiled and whacked the cymbals—*CRASH! BANG!*—one at a time. She did it again…and again…and again…and again. *CRASH! BANG! CRASH! BANG-A-DEE-BANG! CRASH! BANG! CRASH! BANG-A-DEE! BANG-A-DEE! BOOM!*

With her eyes closed, she let her arms fly in a series of rolls and riffs, wherever they wanted to go. If her eyes had been open, she would have seen the energy aura surrounding her glow brighter and brighter pink. But the light grew so blinding she would have soon had to close them again.

Scarlet had never played her drums so hard before or felt so energized. All her frustration, her bitterness, her confusion dissolved with every beat. Finally, after what felt like a moogle but could have been a staryear, Scarlet had to stop. Exhausted, she let go of her drumsticks and let them twirl in the air above the tom-tom while her head fell back. As her eyes opened, she let out a gasp at the dazzling sight of pure sparkling energy pulsing throughout the room.

Did I do that? Scarlet wondered. There was no other source she could see.

Gradually, the energy faded, but Scarlet's clarity did not. From the beginning, she had suspected there was something not right about Ophelia's

replacing her. Now she was sure. And if *she* didn't get to the bottom of it, who else on Starland would? Maybe Vega could help her. But maybe not. Who knew? *And why wait to see,* Scarlet thought as her eyes fell on her roommate's jam-packed costume closet, *when I have all I need to do it on my own?*

CHAPTER 4

The door to Scarlet's dorm room slid open and a small, distinguished-looking man stepped into the hall. He wore a long silver topcoat with a wide forest-green collar and half-moon-shaped buttons as big as ears. His own ears were covered by a burnt-orange fedora tilted so far forward it concealed his face. The only feature not hidden, in fact, was the very tip of his emerald beard. Pausing, he stroked the bright green whiskers as his head swiveled right and left. Satisfied that the hall was empty, he raised a star-studded shiny black combat boot and boarded the Cosmic Transporter as it rolled past him.

Scarlet hoped her disguise (courtesy of her roommate's closet) was convincing. The first test was the Bot-Bot guard at the front door.

She brushed past it, keeping her head down and her velvet collar up.

"Star greetings, Scarlet," the Bot-Bot guard said cheerfully.

Scarlet sighed. "Star greetings," she mumbled without turning. Bot-Bot guards were a useless gauge, she guessed. They could read an aura a floozel away. Hopefully, the Starling adults where she was going would be easier to trick.

Once outside, Scarlet headed directly for the enormous star-shaped building between the hedge maze and the Celestial Café. Although it wasn't geographically at the center of campus, it was the hub in every other way.

Halo Hall, as it was called, housed all the Starling Academy classrooms, as well as the Astral Auditorium, where assemblies and performances were held. In the hall, too, were various offices, including that of Lady Stella, the headmistress. Its most spectacular feature was the gleaming lone white tower attached to the Wish-House. At the very top sat the Wishworld Surveillance Deck, the platform where Starlings could observe Wishworld and its Wishlings through telescopes and where they waited to catch a shooting star when their day for a Wish Mission came at last.

Normally, a Starling walked up the white starmarble stairs and entered through the front doors. Since this starday was far from normal, however, Scarlet hurried around the Bot-Bot guard at the front and made her way into Halo Hall through the back. After all, she wasn't going to some old class in Stellation four or five. She was on a mission to right what was wrong.

If only she knew exactly where she needed to go.

As far as offices went, Scarlet was familiar with only two: that of the perky guidance counselor, Lady Solara, who had made it her mission to "light Scarlet up," and Lady Stella's. Both were offices Scarlet hoped to stay well clear of, since she didn't want to see either administrator just then. Fortunately, they were clustered with other faculty offices in Stellation one and she was fairly certain that the office she was looking for was in Stellation two…or maybe three.

She decided to try the second wing first, since it was closest. Like every hall, its walls and floor were made of gleaming rainbow-hued starmarble. In that wing, they gave off a pink-tinged glow. Up near the ceiling ran a series of windows, letting light from outside shine in. Scarlet hurried down the hall, passing door after door. As she did, she lifted her hat brim ever so slightly to read the holo-signs outside of each.

SUPPLY ROOM, read one star-shaped plaque. STAR-ZAP REPAIR AND MAINTENANCE, announced the next, followed by TECHNOLOGY, SWIFT-TRANSPORTATION SERVICES, and WISH ENERGY MANAGEMENT. Then Scarlet read the holo-sign by the door at the end: BOT-BOT SECURITY.

Freakin' fireballs, she thought. *Security! Time to turn around!*

Heart thumping, she scurried back down the hall and rounded the corner into the safety, she hoped, of Stellation three. *Please let me find what I'm looking for here,* she wished.

That hall looked basically the same, except the glow given off by the marble walls was a bit aquamarine. These doors, too, had holo-signs, and

Scarlet read the first one on her right: ADMISSIONS. Lady Cordial's office. Of course. Scarlet remembered it now from her own Time of Applying, when she had first visited the school. She'd come alone, since her parents had been on tour and unable to take the time off. Lady Cordial, the head of admissions, had been pleasant in their interview but not as welcoming as one might have hoped—especially one with test scores such as Scarlet's, which were practically off the charts. But that was Lady Cordial, Scarlet now realized: stiff and skittish and often at a loss for words. Scarlet had eventually learned, like every Starling Academy student, not to take things too personally with her.

On the other hand, Scarlet's next interview with Lady Stella had been one of the best starhours of her whole life. There was something about the headmistress that made every Starling feel as if she'd known her for staryears. Scarlet had already *thought* she wanted to go to Starling Academy, but meeting Lady Stella had sealed the deal. The headmistress didn't care if Scarlet didn't like rainbows as much as rain clouds or loved the most unloved of Starling colors—black. She seemed to know, too, that Scarlet wasn't half as interested in learning to grant wishes as she was in living on her own. And yet she welcomed Scarlet into Starling Academy with warm and open arms. Lady Stella had always seen Scarlet for who she was and admired her for being herself, which only made Scarlet feel worse about having to leave the Star Darlings—and more determined to get back in.

With that in mind, she moved on, shifting her hat to continue reading each star-shaped sign.

ATTENDANCE, ACCOUNTING, ALUMNI RELATIONS, STUDENT LIFE, FACULTY LOUNGE…

"'Faculty lounge'?" *Hmmm.* Scarlet paused. So *this* was where their professors hung out when they weren't teaching the finer points of Wishful Thinking or giving a pop quiz on wish identification. She could only imagine what they did in there. Compare lesson plans? Share grading tips? Complain about students, such as Scarlet, who liked to bark out answers instead of politely raising their hands? She pictured them gathered around a table, sharing sighs and cups of Zing.

"Are you going in?"

Scarlet froze.

The person behind her spoke again. “Star apologies. I don’t mean to rush you.” A hand reached over Scarlet’s shoulder to cover the scanner in the middle of the door. “It’s just, well, my class ran a few moogles over and I’m late for my massage.”

The scanner glowed bright blue. “Welcome, Professor Nicola Cecelia,” a Bot-Bot voice greeted the teacher—her Astral Accounting teacher, Scarlet realized—as the door to the faculty lounge opened wide.

Starf! thought Scarlet as her eyes took in the scene. She was careful to keep her hat low, but she could still make out much of the room—everything from the frozen cocomoon yogurt bar to the manicure/pedicure stations to the hot tub *and* swimming pool! Most classes were still in session, so the lounge was far from full. Nevertheless, there were plenty of teachers already enjoying themselves. Professor Elara Ursa, the Wishers 101 teacher, was having her hair done by a Bot-Bot stylist as she read a holo-magazine. Professor Eugenia Bright, meanwhile, was playing a rather intense spark-filled game of star-pong with Professor Dolores Raye. Giggles spilled out of a holo–photo booth, but Scarlet couldn’t see who was inside. She sniffed. Was that zoomberry trifle she smelled? She sniffed again. *Mmm*...yes, it was…and glorange meringue pie, as well. Scarlet’s mouth was already watering by the time her eyes found the buffet.

“Come on in!” By now, Professor Nicola Cecelia had slipped around Scarlet and stood inside. Reaching up, she pulled a silver-star-topped comb out of each side of her tight plum-colored bun. With a shake, she let her hair tumble down loose over her shoulders, and it stopped well below her waist. “Don’t be shy. Substitutes are welcome. More than welcome, in fact!” She flashed a smile far sunnier than Scarlet had ever seen on her normally dour face. “You could probably use a break the most. These students are bright, but give them half a chance and they’ll wear your glow away. Whose class did you have, by the way? I didn’t realize anyone was out. I hope you didn’t wear that hat and coat all day. You know, there are Bot-Bot valets to see to things like that.”

For a moogle, Scarlet was actually tempted to play along and follow her teacher inside. Before, she had thought that the students’ Lightning Lounge had everything a Starling could ever desire. But its cozy fireplaces, pillows, and walls of holo-screens were nothing compared with the faculty’s giant lounge. The only problem was Scarlet knew that as soon as she took her hat off, she would give herself away. Frankly, she was surprised—*star*tled, even

—that Professor Nicola Cecelia hadn't raised a single violet eyebrow at her beard, which was steadily shifting sideways.

"Ahem." Scarlet cleared her throat as deeply as she could. "Star salutations," she said gruffly. She gave the brim of her hat a dapper tap, the way she'd seen her father do. "But, *ahem*, I'm looking for another, *ahem*, room. *Ahem.*"

"Oh." The teacher's grin faded. "I see. And what room is that?"

"*Ahem.* Er, holo-records."

"You mean the holo-records room right there?" Professor Nicola Cecelia pointed a delicate sparkly purple-polished fingernail at the next door down the hall.

Scarlet turned and squinted to read the sign. STUDENT HOLO-RECORDS. There it was!

"Star salutations!" Scarlet said—too quickly, she feared. But then Professor Nicola Cecelia's head suddenly snapped around. Her Bot-Bot masseuse was summoning her, rather impatiently by then.

"*Starf!* Got to go. So there it is. Glad I could help. Oh! And so you know, Lunadays we always play astro-poker in the lounge. I almost always win, but still, keep it in mind."

Scarlet let out a long sigh as the door slid shut between them. She hadn't even realized she'd been holding her breath. She checked to make sure no other teachers were coming. They weren't. She sighed again.

It took just a starmin to reach the door of the holo-records room. Then the only question left was, how was she going to get inside?

CHAPTER 5

Scarlet knew better than to try the hand scanner. That would only give her away. There were other ways to get into a room, though, especially now that Professor Nicola Cecelia had confirmed the strength of her disguise.

Scarlet checked her reflection in the mirrorlike surface of the polished marble wall. She slid her beard back to the center and gave it a fluff. She tugged her hat down even farther and propped her collar higher. Satisfied, she raised her fist and rapped on the door…once…twice…three times.

While she waited for the door to open, she went over the story she'd already rehearsed a hydrong times in her mind:

"Hello, my name is Sir Copernicus, and I am here on behalf of Sir Andromedus and Lady Melodia, the famous musicians, as I'm sure you're well aware. Apparently, they've sent numerous holo-requests for their daughter's records, none of which has received a reply. You can imagine what an eclipse they're having. One would think a school like this would have all its stars in a straighter row. But since they're clearly not, the family has sent me to retrieve Scarlet's records, as they're on an extended tour across the Star-Belt region and so could not do it themselves. It's crystal clear, of course, that you're very busy, so I wouldn't dream of taking up your valuable time. Rather, if you'll just point me in the direction of the

third-year holo-files…Star salutations for understanding. I'll take it from here, if you don't mind."

Scarlet would be free to compare all her scores to Ophelia's—and anyone else's she chose. Leona's, for one…Gemma's maybe, too…Then she would at least understand why *they* were all Star Darlings and she suddenly was not.

It had to work. It just had to. Otherwise, Scarlet didn't know how she was going to go on. She couldn't keep avoiding everyone and everything forever. Her grades would suffer, and so would she. But until she had some real answers, she would never, in a hydrong staryears, be able to relax.

The only problem was the door wasn't opening. So Scarlet took another breath and knocked again. She tapped the toe of her thick-soled boot. Sparks bounced up from the floor. Did she have to *keep* knocking? She raised her fist. She guessed she did. That was when she noticed, for the first time, the hand scanner—or not the scanner, but what it said.

Scarlet groaned.

She should have looked at it sooner, but she'd been too focused on the door. Instead of displaying a hand outline along with the unnecessary PALM HERE message, the scanner scrolled a series of words: OFFICE HOURS: SUNRISE TO APEX. PLEASE COME BACK. STATUS: CLOSED.



On the way back to the dorm Scarlet shed her disguise behind a lumilac bush about halfway to the building. Classes had ended and Starlings were wandering about, and if one more student had pleasantly waved and called, "Star greetings! Welcome to Starling Academy!" Scarlet would have exploded into a moonium bitter, red-hot stars right there in front of them. When she wasn't in disguise, the other students knew better than to try to talk to her or even share a smile. After Scarlet's more than two staryears at Starling Academy, her reliably antisocial reputation preceded her.

Thankfully, Scarlet made it back to her room before Mira, so she had time to put everything away. The floppy orange hat went back on the hat rack, and the coat went into Mira's costume closet, along with the itchy beard. Scarlet had just sat down at her drums and picked up her drumsticks when the door slid open and Mira breezed in.

“There you are!” Mira pointed one long glittery finger at Scarlet. The other hand perched on her hip. She was dressed as a regular Starling student for a change, even if she had a cobalt blue scarf the size of a bedsheet around her neck. *“Starf!”* she exclaimed. “*So* many Starlings have been asking me about you! Especially all those remedial Starlings, like Leona and Adora—and Ophelia now. ‘Where’s Scarlet?’ ‘Have you seen her?’ ‘Could you please give her a holo-message for me?’ I’m like, ‘Send her your own holo-message.’ And they’re like, ‘We do, but she won’t reply.’” Mira cocked her head and frowned. “Did you lose your Star-Zap or something? We could literally find it in a moogle with my Zap-locate app, you know.”

“I didn’t lose it,” mumbled Scarlet. “I’ve just been busy.”

“Oh.” Mira’s eyes skimmed Scarlet’s drum kit. “Right. Okay. I see. Well, don’t let me stop you.” She shrugged and tossed a long triangle of scarf over her shoulder. It took three tries before it stayed. “I’m zipping right back out again, anyway. I just popped in to get my holo-script before rehearsal. Now…where did I leave it do you think…?”

“Why don’t you just memorize your lines overnight?” asked Scarlet. Wasn’t that what sleep and headphones were for, after all? So Starlings could play back and absorb class lectures and textbooks and anything else they needed to learn?

Mira sighed. “You don’t know anything about acting, do you?” She tossed her head to show that *she* did.

Scarlet lowered her own head to hide the smile she couldn’t keep from springing up. Oh, after her day, she knew about acting….Too bad Mira hadn’t seen her. She would have been impressed.

“A script,” Mira went on, “is just the beginning. Like a supernova!” She held her fists out and flashed open her fingers. “It’s merely the raw matter from which superstars are born. In rehearsal, we’re taking notes constantly and making changes. It’s not just memorizing a hydrong lines,” she said, scoffing. “It’s a *process*. A *journey*. You know?”

Scarlet nodded, hoping to satisfy Mira, though she’d stopped listening at “beginning.”

“Is that your script?” Scarlet pointed to a holo-book near the edge of Mira’s makeup-crowded table, behind a long sparkly teal wig on a tall silver stand.

“Is it?” Mira picked up the holo-book and brought it close enough to read. “Star salutations! It is! Okay, I’m off. Again.” She paused then, leaning toward Scarlet. “Are you sure you’re okay? You know, you look a little green….”

“I do?”

“Mmm-hmm. Around here.” Mira stroked her cheeks and chin.

The beard! Scarlet realized. Quickly, she rubbed her face to brush off whatever green glitter was stuck to it. “I’m fine,” she said. “Don’t worry about me. Just go do your script journey…process…whatever you call it.”



Scarlet had lowered the window shades and blinked off the lights by the time Mira returned. The room had a soft, dreamy violet glow. Dinner was over, as was star-gazing hour, though lights-down had yet to come. Except for the secret Star Caves, of course, no place ever got truly dark on Starland, the way places on Wishworld did. In fact, it actually got brighter as the sun went down and all the wish energy stored in every atom on Starland approached its maximum glow potential.

Scarlet “acted” again, this time as if she was sleeping, in case Mira had more questions to ask her or, worse, offered unwanted advice. She lay as quiet and still as a moonbeam and waited for Mira to take her nightly sparkle shower and slip into bed herself. Actually falling asleep, however, was impossible. The thoughts whizzing through Scarlet’s mind simply would not let her rest.

At last, Scarlet had no choice but to get out of bed. She couldn’t lie there for a moogle more. Mira was fast asleep, though restlessly muttering something like “Wait! Where’s my mark? Somebody moved it from stage left!”

Scarlet slid out from her silky black sheets and scooped her combat boots off the floor. As light as a flutterfocus, she tiptoed past Mira, blinked open the door, and, still wearing her pink-and-black polka-starred pajamas, slipped out into the hall.

To save energy, the hallway Cosmic Transporter ceased flowing after lights-down, but Scarlet was happy to walk. She left her feet bare on the off chance that some other wakeful Starling might hear the *clomp-clomp* of her

boots through their chamber doors. Starlings slept exceptionally soundly… still, "better safe than lost in space," as Scarlet's father sometimes said.

It wasn't Scarlet's first venture out after lights-down. She'd been taking walks on restless nights since the beginning of the year, when she'd literally stumbled upon the entrance to the mysterious Star Caves. That was before Lady Stella had taken the Star Darlings there, via a secret door in her office, to show them the Wish Cavern she'd had built in the deepest chamber for them and them alone. It was there that the headmistress kept their Wish Orbs. Scarlet knew she had looked as awed and surprised by the caves as everyone else at the time. That was yet another example of her acting talents, she supposed, since she had already discovered the caves herself more than a starweek earlier.

She had arrived at school, as usual, stardays before everyone else. She'd had quite enough of her parents and living out of a suitcase for one Time of Lumiere break. She had checked out her room and was aimlessly riding the Cosmic Transporter around the dorm when she noticed the neon sign on the door in front of her. STARLING ACADEMY STAFF ONLY, it temptingly flashed.

Naturally, she got off and opened it (after peeking over each of her shoulders to make sure she was alone). But it was just a plain old supply closet full of baskets of star-pong balls, sparkle-shower gel, and stuff like that. Because nothing on Starland ever got truly dirty, there were no cleaning supplies, of course. There were, however, a few dust mops and feather dusters for adding an extra layer of stardust to anything that might need shining up. Scarlet had never actually used one, since Bot-Bot maids were always there to shine her hotel rooms. Curious, she took a step into the closet to pull a duster down and see exactly how it worked. "Freakin' fireballs!" she exclaimed as the toe of her boot caught on something and sent her stumbling into a wall of shelves. The next thing she knew, glo-pong balls were raining down on her head like the Perseid meteor shower.

Scarlet looked down as the balls bounced and flashed around her, and that was when she saw the trapdoor. A rogue glo-pong paddle had kept it from closing completely, and that was what had tripped her up. Without thinking twice, she raised the panel and waited as a bunch of glo-pong balls spilled through the hole. She listened to them bounce down a long winding set of metal stairs for several moogles, until they hit a distant floor…then, flipping her Star-Zap to flashlight mode, she climbed in to see for herself exactly what was down there.

Since then, not counting her trips with the Star Darlings, Scarlet had been down to explore the Star Caves more than a dozen times. She'd covered only a tiny fraction, she knew, but on each visit she tried to delve a little deeper than before. This night, without really thinking, she headed due north, down a wide winding tunnel, roughly in the direction of Halo Hall.

As ever, the cave air was cool, like at the top of the Crystal Mountains, but also damp and slightly musty, like her boots before they dried out after a day in Starland snow. The air clung to Scarlet as she moved. Without a doubt, the energy was different down there. What Scarlet liked best of all about the caves was the light that came from glowing rocks set in the walls. It gave her the feeling of being in outer space, where the only light came from distant twinkling stars. Every now and then, as Scarlet walked, a big cold drop of water would splash somewhere on her hair or face. One time, she'd caught one on her tongue. She couldn't say it had much taste.

Suddenly, she heard a high *squeak*, followed by the rustling of wings, and sensed a bitbat swooping down. Scarlet lifted her arm and held out her hand. A starsec later, a silvery-white creature the size of a glowfur settled onto her finger and dangled upside down.

"Star greetings," said Scarlet.

The bitbat blinked its wide fluorescent green eyes and squeaked twice more, as if in reply. Why bitbats made the other Star Darlings nervous, Scarlet would never know. They were as gentle as any flutterfocus, she thought, just not as hyperactive and ostentatious. Unlike every creature that lived on the surface of Starland, Star Cave creatures did not show off.

The creatures were her second favorite thing about the caves. She envied their solitude, their privacy, their freedom to be themselves and to be alone.

As quickly as it had appeared, the bitbat took off again. Scarlet watched it fly deeper into the cave.

"What's down there?" she called out, following it.

She tried to keep up, but the bitbat was too fast. By the time she rounded a tight corner, Scarlet had lost it in the darkness.

But she had found something else….

CHAPTER 6

Scarlet was dressed and out of her room the next morning before Mira was even awake. Scarlet hadn't slept a wink. She'd spent most of the night in the room at the top of the stairs she'd discovered in the Star Caves, after losing sight of the bitbat. Was it luck that those stairs had led to a trapdoor into the Office of Student Holo-Records? Or was it somehow fate?

Halo Hall would not open officially for another hour but she couldn't see waiting around. She raced across campus to the entrance and begged the Bot-Bot guard to let her in.

"I have to see Lady Stella!" she said. "It's urgent! It can't wait!"

"Star apologies, Scarlet," the Bot-Bot guard replied mechanically. "Halo Hall is not open, nor is Lady Stella in. Would you like to make an appointment? I can help you with that, if you wish. Lady Stella's office hours are eleven to thirteen starhours. She has another meeting scheduled from twelve to twelve-eighty. What time do you request?"

Scarlet's energy sizzled. That was exactly the problem with thickheaded Bot-Bots. They didn't *understand*. She didn't need an *appointment*. She needed to see the headmistress right *then*!

"Sc-sc-scarlet! Er, st-st-star greetings."

Scarlet turned to see the head of admissions, Lady Cordial, walking briskly toward the door with a stack of files and a mug of Zing.

“Star greetings, Lady Cordial,” said Scarlet, bowing.

“You’re up early. Feeling better?” She stood before Scarlet, smiling in an awkward but sweet way. Scarlet realized she hadn’t seen the head of admissions since learning that her being a Star Darling was a mistake.

“I know what *happened*…” Lady Cordial paused and cut her eyes to the Bot-Bot guard, who, like everyone else, knew nothing about the top secret group. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to turn off your hearing for a starsec,” she told it.

“Yes, Lady Cordial. As you wish.”

Lady Cordial fixed her eyes on its head and narrowed them. “Can you hear me now?” she asked.

She waited.

“Very good. So, er, I was s-saying…” She turned back to Scarlet. “I know this mix-up with Ophelia was, well, quite a…quite a blow, I’m s-s-sure. Of course, I take full responsibility for everything.” She lowered her head and shook it. “How it happened, I’ll never know.”

“But that’s why I’m here! I don’t think it *did* happen!”

Lady Cordial’s head rose slowly, as Starland’s sun was doing just then. “St-st-star excuse me? You don’t think *what* happened?”

“I don’t think there’s been a mix-up!” blurted Scarlet. “I mean, yes, there’s been a mix-up—but it’s the mix-up that’s a mistake! I looked at my holo-records and there’s no way in the Milky Way that the scores recorded in them are mine! On the other hand, Ophelia, whose records I also checked, has exactly the scores that I should have. And that’s why I’m here—to tell Lady Stella that our scores were switched somehow!”

“What?” Lady Cordial gasped. Her cup of Zing slipped out of her hand. Scarlet jumped back and used her energy to catch the cup in midair, but not without hot liquid splashing over her tights and boots. Of course, it all disappeared in a starsec, as spills on Starland always did.

“St-st-star apologies,” said Lady Cordial. She blinked her cup back into her hand and clutched both it and her folders to her chest. “Clearly, you’ve taken me by starprise here. Moon and st-st-stars…” She took a breath. “If this is true, why…er…we have more problems than we thought….I must look into this immediately. And inform Lady St-st-stella, of course.”

“I’ll go with you!” Scarlet told her.

“No, no. St-st-star s-s-salutations, but you’ve done your part—and more.” Lady Cordial’s smile slowly returned. “Please, Sc-sc-scarlet, let me

take this from here. It's, er, the least I can do."



Scarlet was so excited she couldn't eat breakfast. And no way could she go to class. How could she sit through another lecture on energy manipulation when her whole life was about to change? About to get back on track, at last!

She had to find some way to pass the time, though, while she waited for Lady Cordial to set everything straight. She flipped open her Star-Zap, tapped Vega's icon, and dictated a holo-text.

MYSTERY SOLVED! MEET ME IN THE ORCHARD.

Within a starmin another message came through: NO WAY! ★MENDOUS NEWS!

When Vega arrived, she was not alone to Scarlet's surprise. Cassie, with her pinkish white pigtail buns and her star-shaped glasses, was arm in arm with her.

Scarlet knew Cassie, of course, from the Star Darlings class but not very well beyond that. The first-year Starling had become particularly close to Scarlet's old roommate, Leona—something Scarlet could never understand, since Leona was, without a doubt, the most self-centered, self-absorbed Starling Scarlet had ever met.

Still, besides that, Scarlet had to admit that what she did know of Cassie, she admired. Cassie was never too loud or bubbly or bossy, and it was clear that behind her glasses, a very intelligent mind was hard at work.

"You don't mind that I brought Cassie, do you?" said Vega. Something about Scarlet's expression must have prompted her to ask. "I promised her I'd tell her the next time we met. I told her about your…theories, and of course—"

"I think you're right!" Cassie cut in. She leaned forward and pushed up her glasses. Her normally soft pink glow flashed bright, almost blindingly white. "I don't care what Leona says. There is no way in the galaxy that Ophelia could grant a wish. Tell us everything!" she said. "What have you found out?"

So Scarlet told them everything….

"Moon and stars!" Cassie gasped at the end. "So when will you hear back from Lady Cordial?"

“Soon,” Scarlet said. “I’m sure.”

“Oh, I hope it’s all a mistake, the way you say!”

“Does that mean you’ll come back to the band?” Vega asked. “You know, there was just an announcement this morning—did you hear?—that this year for Starshine Day there’s going to be a battle of the bands. We could win with you playing, Scarlet. I really think we could. In fact… maybe you should come back, no matter what, even if it turns out no mistake was made.”

“First of all”—Scarlet’s eyes narrowed—“there *was* a mistake. A starmendous one. That’s just a fact. Second, as I’ve said a hydrong times now, the band is about the last thing on my mind.”

Vega and Cassie lowered their eyes and traded glances.

“Star apologies,” said Vega. “Of course. We can talk about the band later. One thing at a time. So…if there was a mistake…how in the stars did it happen? How did your and Ophelia’s scores get switched?”

Scarlet shook her head. “That’s what I don’t know.” Her eyes flashed and flickered between Vega and Cassie. “You’re the puzzle solvers. Any thoughts?”

“These things happen, I suppose,” said Vega.

Cassie frowned. “Not here. Not at Starling Academy. All these ‘mistakes,’ ‘coincidences,’ ‘mysteries’—they don’t just *happen* here.”

Vega nodded reluctantly. “Agreed.”

“So do you think somebody switched our records?” said Scarlet. “On purpose? But those things don’t happen here, either…do they?”

The three Starlings traded worried looks. They were all thinking the same thing, but no one was quite ready to put such a dark thought into words. Then, suddenly, Cassie’s lacy silver sweater pocket beeped. She pulled out her Star-Zap and read the holo-text. Behind her glasses her eyes grew big and round.

“It’s the botany lab!” she exclaimed. “They’ve finished testing the flowers and have the results!”

“Well? What did they find?” asked Vega.

“They don’t say. They just say to come.”

“That’s one connection I still don’t see,” Vega told her. “And it’s not just because I want to win our bet. I was hoping Piper and I would get along better when the flowers were out of our room….”

“And did you?”

“No. Nothing changed. In fact, you should have heard how she went on about my letting you take them to the lab to be studied. You would have thought I’d stolen her bed.”

“Really…” Cassie’s nearly translucent eyebrows slid together as she frowned.

“But then suddenly yesterday,” Vega went on, “she gave me this sweet holo-poem she’d written…and this morning we meditated together.” She smiled at Cassie’s and Scarlet’s dumbfounded expressions. “Cross my stars! I know!”

“There might still be a connection…” said Cassie.

Vega shrugged. “There’s only one way to find out.” She slipped one arm through Cassie’s, then the other through Scarlet’s.

“You want me to come, too?” Scarlet eyed Vega’s elbow and gingerly unhooked her arm.

“Of course,” said Vega. “Right, Cassie?” She tried not to look too hurt by Scarlet’s initial response.

“Moon and stars, yes,” said Cassie, smiling warmly. “We’re in this together now.”

CHAPTER 7

The botany lab was in Halo Hall in the science stellation, where the Starlings' Wishology and Astrophysics classes—among dozens of others—were held. Those labs, though, were on the lower floors. The botany lab took up most of the top floor and had a ceiling made of glass so the hydrongs of plants and flowers growing there had all the sunlight or starlight or moonlight they could want.

Naturally, there were specimens from all over Starland: featherjabbers, mellomallows, even nomadic druderwomps—shrublike knots of glittery branches that were constantly uprooting themselves and lazily rolling around the lab until they got bored and decided to stop and spread their roots, inevitably tripping someone up. The lab was best known, though, for its extensive collection of flora samples from Wishworld. It was the largest collection on Starland, in fact. Generations of Wish-Granters had brought back everything from Spanish moss to buttercups to fragrant evergreen trees. Scientists were still working to get those to bloom ornaments the way they did on Wishworld…but so far, they'd had no luck. Scarlet's personal favorites were the dandelions, which were like two flowers in one, the second better than the first: a starburst of yellow petals followed by tickly cloud-white fluff. And best of all Wishers used them to make wishes! Plus

they didn't overwhelm you with that cloying flower smell, which was always such overkill, Scarlet thought.

The three Starlings—Scarlet, Vega, and Cassie—entered and were met by a pair of turquoise-haired technicians in sturdy star-covered overalls under long shimmery white lab coats.

"Ah! Star greetings, Cassie," said one, a short woman with a blue holo–name tag reading GLADIOLUS ROSE. "Oh, my stars, you got here quickly! You must have ridden a laser beam!"

She clasped her hands and bowed, as was Starland custom. Her partner did the same. He was taller by a moonstone and wore a hard-to-miss star-shaped bandage on his nose.

Cassie bowed in return, as did Vega and Scarlet.

"We couldn't wait to hear the results of your tests!" Cassie told the lab technicians. She nodded to the man. "What happened to you, by the way?"

"What? Oh, this?" The man patted his bandaged nose, then turned to his flickering silver-tinged partner, who guiltily sucked in her cheeks. "Flying flowerpot…Funny story…" He sighed. "Or at least it will be, I hope, one starday."

"Why don't we show them those flowers?" said his partner.

He nodded. "Good idea."

"After you. Please." She waved him past.

"Star salutations, but please, no, after you."

They went on like that, back and forth, until Scarlet couldn't take one more exchange.

"Why don't you show us *together*?"

"Great idea!" they said in unison. "To the back of the lab. This way."

The Starlings followed them down a winding aisle between empty workstations.

"Where is everyone?" Vega asked.

Gladiolus Rose picked up an uprooted kaleidoscope tree sapling and set it on a counter between a broken beaker and an upside-down microscope. "Most of the botanists decided to go home early yesterday. We stayed to finish this job. The energy in the air was rather…*tense*, you might say. Lots of name-calling, flowerpot flinging, energy sapping, I'm afraid."

"Not much work getting done," said her partner. "Not safely, anyway."

Scarlet gazed around at the mess and couldn't help cracking a smile. She could only imagine the scene that must have made it.

“That sounds like Piper and me,” said Vega. “Until yesterday afternoon.” Suddenly, her expression began to change. “When exactly did your fighting stop?”

“Almost as soon as we put them behind glass,” Gladiolus Rose answered. “When was that?” She turned to her partner. “In the afternoon?”

“Indeed, it was.”

Cassie’s eyes grew round, and so did Vega’s. Scarlet’s jaw dropped slightly, too.

“Are you saying you think the flowers made you bicker and fight?” asked Vega.

“I’m afraid so,” the techs said together. “Star apologies!” They bowed and laughed.

“As you can see,” said Gladiolus Rose, “arguing is not in our nature. So as soon as it started, we knew that something was starmendously wrong.”

“The moment we put them behind glass, however,” the man said, “the fiery tempers cooled.”

He pointed to a glass case at the end of the lab. Inside, the Starlings could see Vega and Piper’s lavish coral-colored bouquet.

Scarlet instantly remembered the flowers, though she’d given them little thought when they showed up in her room. Not surprisingly, Leona had claimed them for her half of the room almost immediately, so Scarlet paid even less attention to them after that.

“You were absolutely correct in suspecting those flowers of negative energy,” Gladiolus Rose told Cassie as they moved toward the case. “The things are full of it, in fact. The measurements we recorded were frankly *floozels* off the charts. It’s as if each and every flower was grown in negative-energy-infused soil.”

Scarlet scowled and spoke up. “But isn’t that impossible? Every Bad Wish Orb is destroyed immediately. That’s one of the first things we learn when we get to this school.”

“Moon and stars! We didn’t think negative energy even *existed* on Starland,” said Cassie with a gulp.

Scarlet hadn’t thought Cassie could look any paler—and yet, somehow, she did.

Gladiolus Rose shook her head. “It doesn’t. Technically,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Vega asked.

The two lab technicians exchanged grim glances.

The tall one cleared his throat. “There have been leaks in the past… from the Bad Wish Containment Center.”

“*But* that was *hydrongs* of staryears ago,” his partner assured the Starlings. “There have been mix-ups, too…bad wishes mistaken for good ones at first….But such a thing is exceedingly rare, and by the time the mistake is corrected, almost all the potential negative energy has yet to be released.”

“‘Almost’?” Vega said.

“Almost.” The woman nodded. “So, yes, it’s not beyond the spectrum of possibility for there to be a microjoule in the air. But nowhere near enough to account for the concentrations we’re seeing here. It’s unprecedented, frankly.” She turned to peer into the case. “Never before, at least in this lab, have we seen negative plant life half as powerful—or *negative*—as this.”

“So…what you’re saying, then,” said Scarlet, “is that this mystery still isn’t solved. You don’t know where the flowers came from.”

“Not yet. No. But our tests aren’t finished. There are a few more we can do. Hopefully, we can identify the exact source of the negative energy and even pinpoint where the flowers were grown.”

“How long will it take, do you think?” asked Vega.

“I’d say a starday…maybe two…three at most.” Gladiolus Rose shrugged. “It’s difficult to say until the rest of the staff returns to work.”

Her partner gazed around the overturned lab. “We were also hoping to straighten things up a little first. That’s one thing about this Wishworld dirt…it doesn’t seem to clean itself up. It just sits there when it’s spilled.”

“Well, we can help you with *that*,” said Vega matter-of-factly. She looked down at the loose Wishworld dirt scattered across the floor. Her eyes narrowed as she focused her energy on gathering the dirt into a pile. As soon as she collected it all, Vega flicked her wrist and lifted it in a steady stream, using her finger to steer it into the nearest flowerpot.

Scarlet looked over to see Cassie starting to use her energy, as well. One by one, on the counter in front of Cassie, overturned plants were popping upright.

“Star salutations!” said the lab technicians.

Vega beamed. “It’s the least we can do! Scarlet…? What are you waiting for over there? The faster we clean up this lab, the faster they can run more tests.”

“Why don’t we just zap up some Bot-Bot maids?” said Scarlet, looking bleakly around the room. She would rather have linked arms with Leona than do that job, even with the help of her energy manipulation.

“And where would be the fun in that?” asked Vega brightly, adjusting a trayful of laser-bean seedlings just so.

Suddenly, she jumped, and so did Cassie. Both Starlings pulled out their Star-Zaps.

“Moon and stars!” gasped Cassie. She looked at Vega, who was just closing her device and slipping it back into her fitted coat.

“What is it?” asked Scarlet.

Cassie hurried over to Scarlet and whispered so the lab technicians wouldn’t hear: “Another Wish Orb’s been identified.” Only a few faculty besides Lady Stella and Lady Cordial knew of the existence of the Star Darlings, and it was imperative it stay that way. “We have to go to Lady Stella’s office. Immediately. To find out whose wish this will be.”

“I’m coming, too!” Scarlet moved toward the lab door.

“Did your Star-Zap go off?” Cassie asked.

Scarlet stopped and put her hand on the pocket of her hooded vest. She hadn’t felt any vibration. She looked, but she knew the answer was no before she saw the screen. “I’m going anyway.”

“I don’t know….” Cassie shook her head. “Lady Stella knows best, and if she didn’t summon you, I don’t think that you *can* go.”

“But I’m a Star Darling!”

“*Shhh!*” Cassie quickly glanced over her shoulder. Luckily, the lab technicians were in the far corner, straightening some crooked holo-screens.

“But I *am* a Star Darling!” Scarlet hissed. “If there’s a wish assignment, I should be there!”

Vega had come over, too. Both she and Cassie took Scarlet’s hands. “Patience, Scarlet. If you truly are a Star Darling—and I certainly don’t doubt it—then the stars will realign for you, all in due time,” Vega said.

Scarlet yanked her hands away and squeezed her lips together tightly. She was close to saying something she just might regret.

“We’ll let you know what happens,” Cassie assured her.

“Whatever.” Scarlet raised her chin and looked away. She would have liked to see how much patience Vega or Cassie or any other Star Darling would have were she to trade places with one of them.

High above, over the ceiling skylight, a pink cloud the shape of a galliope's head slowly drifted past. She closed her eyes and thought of Wishworld, somewhere beyond it, orbiting through space full of wishes.

"Keep your stars up," said Vega. She reached out and gave Scarlet's arm a squeeze. "If we see Lady Cordial, we'll ask her about your reports….I'm sure we'll have some good news for you by the time you're done helping here!"



"Well?"

"Starf!"

"*Scarlet!* Moon and *stars*!"

"You scared the light out of us!" Vega gasped.

"Star apologies." Scarlet stepped all the way around the column she'd been standing behind and pulled her hood back from her face. They were in the hall outside Lady Stella's office, where Scarlet had been lurking for a starhour, or quite possibly longer. She could have waited for Vega and Cassie to holo-call or text her, but waiting had never been Scarlet's style.

"Why were you hiding?" asked Cassie.

"I wasn't *hiding*. I was just trying to stay out of sight…" Scarlet explained.

Cassie and Vega wrinkled their glittery foreheads.

"Anyway," Scarlet went on. "What happened? Who got the mission? And what did Lady Stella have to say about *me*? I didn't see Ophelia come out. Have they already told her about the mistake?"

Vega's cheeks flashed ever so faintly. Cassie's lip slid beneath her teeth. Scarlet couldn't tell if they looked more like they'd eaten too much zoomberry cake or like someone had stolen cake from them.

"What's wrong?"

Vega's and Cassie's eyes met and something passed between them. Scarlet felt her glow dim as it did.

"Tell me."

Vega took a deep breath. "The Wish Orb was Ophelia's."

"The Wish Orb…the Wish Orb was *what*?"

"The Wish Orb was Ophelia's," Vega said again, letting her breath out as she did.

“Wait…so what are you saying?”

“The Wish Orb was Ophelia’s,” Cassie patiently repeated.

Scarlet’s glow returned in a flash, this time hot pink. “I get that,” she muttered. “But are you saying…Are you saying a *Star Darling* Wish Orb chose Ophelia? Are you saying the next Star Darling mission is *hers*? Are you saying…” Scarlet closed her eyes and opened them slowly. “Are you saying Ophelia is going to go to Wishworld to grant a wish instead of *me*?”

Vega nodded.

“Or at least almost there,” Cassie said.

“Star apologies, Scarlet. For what it’s worth, we believed you…but you were wrong, I guess.” Vega reached out to touch Scarlet’s shoulder, but Scarlet stepped away.

“I wasn’t *wrong*,” she snapped. “There was nothing to be wrong about. Scores are scores. I saw what I saw. Tell me…Lady Cordial…what did she have to say?”

Vega and Cassie responded with shrugs.

“Not much,” said Vega, “as usual. She just wished Ophelia lucky stars.”

“That’s all? She didn’t mention the holo-records? Did she at least look starprised?”

“*Everyone* looked starprised,” said Vega.

“Especially Ophelia,” Cassie agreed.

“Actually, Lady Cordial probably looked the least starprised,” added Vega. “Maybe she’d already looked into your theory, Scarlet, and all the holo-records, and didn’t see what you think you saw.”

“No one’s saying you’re lying, Scarlet—or that we were happy to see you go….And we’re definitely not saying there aren’t weird things going on….”

“But I don’t think your leaving the Star Darlings is one,” added Vega.

“You can still help us get to the bottom of the flower mystery!” said Cassie brightly.

“*Flowers?* Are you shooting my stars? I don’t give a crater about your flower mystery,” Scarlet fired back. “I hope whoever sent them sends you a hydrong more, in fact!”

CHAPTER 8

The rest of the day passed in a haze of bitter disappointment for Scarlet. She skipped lunch in the Celestial Café and filled her stomach with cocomoons and gloranges from the Starling Academy orchard instead. Since Starland fruit grew back, full and ripe, as soon as it was picked, Scarlet didn't have to worry about taking too much—or getting in trouble for it.

Skipping class was another story. That wasn't as easy to do. So Scarlet sat through hers, hood pulled down, in the farthest back corner of each room. She barely listened to the lessons, though, since what did they matter to her now? Did she even want to go to Wishworld to grant wishes? The more she thought about it…who *cared*?

So as Professor Andromedus Galapas droned on about the Enlightenment and the lighterature of the day, Scarlet drafted a holo-message to her parents, begging them to take her…*somewhere*, since they didn't exactly have a home.

Dear Mom and Dad,
Wherever you are, please come and get me. As soon as you possibly can. Or if you're too busy, feel free to send a Starcar and I will come to you. It's taken me almost three staryears, but I finally see that I

was wrong and you were right. I was lucky to be able to travel all around Starland with you, having tutors instead of teachers who think they're so shiny and bright at some silly snooty school full of Starlings who act like they're the center of the whole universe. I made a starmendous mistake applying to Starling Academy. I wasn't meant to grant Wishling wishes. Never mind what I said about hating the idea of a family trio. I was wrong. Take me back, please, so I can play the drums with you.

Love and stars,
Scarlet

She read it over…raised her finger…

She sighed and hit DELETE.

"You'd like to go, Scarlet?"

"Huh?" Scarlet heard her name and looked up.

Professor Galapas was staring at her. So was the rest of the class. Open holo-books hovered in front of everyone but Scarlet, their text projected into the air.

"You raised your hand? You'd like to read aloud next?"

"What? No, sir. I mean, I didn't mean to." Scarlet looked at her finger, which was still in the air, then back at the teacher in the front of the room.

His bald head gleamed like the ice-covered summit of the Crystal Mountains. His face was as round as a star ball and just as bright. When he wore dark robes, as he usually did, it was almost as if the moon was up there teaching the class.

"'*Mean* to.' A mere technicality. Some things are written in the stars. Please, Scarlet, *enlighten* us. Just pick up where Leona concluded, if you don't mind."

Scarlet panicked slightly, and her eyes cut to her old roommate, whose seat was always front and center in every room, like she was a curly-haired sun for the world to orbit.

"Um…" She opened her holo-book and projected a page. She had no idea if it was the *right* one. Before she could read, though, and know for certain, the image in front of her blinked. The page changed, and Scarlet

sensed Leona looking at her with a half smile on her bright gold-flecked face.



"You owe me."

Scarlet had barely escaped from Constellation Classroom 315 when a voice behind her made her stop.

"What?" She knew the voice before she turned. Still, she hadn't expected Leona's expression, which was somewhere between "Please, don't leave me" and "Gotcha!"

"You owe me," Leona repeated.

"Uh…star salutations…?" Scarlet said. Leona had been unexpectedly generous in giving Scarlet the correct page number, she supposed. She bowed and reluctantly worked to soften her permanent frown.

But Leona shook her head. "I don't want your salutations."

"Then what do you want?"

Leona crossed her tawny, sparkling arms over her gold mesh tunic. "I want you to come back to the band."

"Oh." Scarlet jammed her hands in the pockets of her hoodie. "Star apologies. No can do. Besides, have you happened to notice you have a new roommate? *Ophelia?*" She could feel her cheeks glowing hotter and hotter. "I'm not a Star Darling anymore."

Leona shrugged. "Who said you had to be one?"

"Uh, you did, I'm pretty sure."

"Did I?" Leona squeezed one eye shut, trying to remember. "Well, if I did, then I changed my mind."

"Great. Then find one of the other hydrongs of students here to be your drummer, because I'm not interested," Scarlet said.

"Oh, come *on*," Leona groaned. "Stop *pouting* already and just come *back*. At least until Starshine Day, so we can win the battle of the bands."

Scarlet laughed. "You're hystarical, you know that, Leona?" She shook her head in disbelief. "Do you honestly think I care one proton about some Starling Academy battle of the bands? Or if the Star Darlings win? *Especially* after the way you wrote me off the moogle you found out I wasn't a Star Darling anymore? How about I put this in your own words,

the ones you said when I came to you then: ‘I don’t give a star.’ How’s that? Hmmm? Now you know how it feels.”

Leona stood there, her glow visibly faded. She clearly didn’t know what to say. Scarlet would have been happy with a simple “star apologies,” but that was a lot to ask, she guessed.

Or was it?

Leona’s golden lips slowly opened and a word began to form.

Beep!

She jumped at the sudden sound of her Star-Zap and quickly pulled it out. Whatever the holo-text said, it made her eyes pop, and whatever word she’d had primed disappeared.

“Gotta fly!”

“What happened?” asked Scarlet.

Leona paused. “It’s Ophelia…” she began. Then she checked herself and turned away.

“What about her?” Scarlet went on.

But by then, Leona was gone.



If Leona had any idea Scarlet was following her, she didn’t let on. When it was clear that she was heading to Lady Stella’s office, Scarlet hung back a little more. She hugged the cool marble wall at the end of the corridor and watched Leona and the other Star Darlings file over the threshold….Then, just as the door started closing, Scarlet silently slipped through.

The Star Darlings were all so excited no one took notice of the pink-tinged shadow making its way to the back of the room. Scarlet slid into the corner, behind a potted boingtree. The branches were far enough apart for Scarlet to peek through but full enough of bright color-changing leaves to serve as an excellent screen.

She looked for Lady Stella but couldn’t see her. The Star Darlings seemed starprised by her absence, as well, and stood chattering anxiously instead of taking seats around the large full moon–shaped table in the center of the room, as they’d normally do.

When Lady Stella finally entered through the hidden door in the back of her office, which led to the Star Darlings’ secret Star Caves, her face wore

uncharacteristic lines. She paused to consider every Star Darling, gazing deeply into each pair of eyes.

"What's up?" Gemma blurted.

"Gemma!" Her sister, Tessa, elbowed her in the ribs.

"I'm afraid," Lady Stella began, "that something quite troublesome is up. There are problems with this latest mission."

"What kind of problems?" Sage asked with a flash. "The same kind of problems we've had before?"

"I'm afraid not," said Lady Stella. "These are far graver….Ophelia's Wish Orb has gone black."

A unified gasp whooshed through the room, as if every air molecule was sucked out. From the shadows, Scarlet watched the stunned Star Darlings grab and squeeze one another's hands. A black Wish Orb meant not only a failing mission but the potential loss of a Starling, as well.

"So…what do we *do*?" said Leona. "Someone has to *help* her!"

"Yes, someone does," Lady Stella agreed.

"I'll go!" said Leona. "I'm ready right now. I can do it this time! Send me!" She moved toward Lady Stella, but the headmistress motioned her back.

"Star salutations, Leona, for your generous offer, but—"

"But what? I can't go because I failed my mission? But I thought you said that wasn't my fault!"

"No, it's not that, Leona," Lady Stella assured her. Calmly she waved away the sparks that were sputtering out of Leona's ears. "I'm afraid only a Wish Orb can pick who goes, as on every other mission when help is required. This situation, of course, is far more dire. But the same procedure is required." Then Lady Stella reached into the folds of the long silver robe she wore. In her hand sat Ophelia's Wish Orb. Each time before, when Lady Stella had gathered them to see who the Wish Orb would choose to help grant the wish, the orb had lost some of its glow. But this orb smoldered dully like a lump of crater coal. It was the ugliest thing Scarlet, or any other Starling, had ever seen in her life.

Lady Stella spread her fingers and let the orb rise and hover between her and the Star Darlings. After a moogle, it began to move…slowly drifting past each glittery, worried face in search of the one it would choose.

"Where is it going?" asked Vega as it floated up to her last, then swerved. "It's not choosing any of us? It's flying away. It's trying to get out

of the room."

"No…it's not," said Cassie, pointing. "Look. It's heading into the corner over there, toward that kaleidoscope tree."

Sure enough, it was. Scarlet watched it approach, just as confused as everyone else. As it reached the tree and stopped, however, she understood at once.

"It chose me!"

Scarlet stepped out from behind the tree, beaming. It was the first smile she'd worn in stardays. She'd almost forgotten how smiling felt. In her palm rested the Wish Orb, which had firmly settled there as soon as she had held her hand out.

"What the stars?" exclaimed Gemma.

Tessa was too shocked to respond to her sister with her usual reproach.

"That's impossible!" said Leona. "She's not a Star Darling anymore!"

"And yet…" Lady Stella glided toward Scarlet, wearing an expression of not unhappy starprise. "Scarlet, I do not know how you got here, but Ophelia's Wish Orb has indeed chosen you. And it is you who must go help Ophelia—and hopefully make the wish come true."

CHAPTER 9

By the time Scarlet's shooting star delivered her to Wishworld, she had fully transformed from a Starling into as convincing a Wishling as a Starling could be. Her skin was flat and freckled, without a hint of sparkle or a tinge of pink. Her eyes were brown instead of rose-colored. She had even toned down her hair so it was black with a single streak of bright pink.

Scarlet was pretty sure, too, that the outfit she'd ultimately chosen would convince any Wishling she might encounter that she'd lived there all her life. First she'd picked those pants Wishlings adored—according to Professor Margaret Dumarre, who knew the ways of Wishlings inside and out. Dungarees, she called them, though most Starlings who'd been to Wishworld seemed to refer to them as jeans. Scarlet also wore a deep burgundy hoodie made of a dense, rather stiff Wishling fabric, with a puffy black vest over that. Finally, on her feet were brand-new boots from Lady Stella, which would be her Wish Pendant from then on. One day, on her own mission, the rows of star-shaped energy-absorbing jewel buckles would light up when she met her Wisher and absorb all the wish energy produced when that Wisher's wish came true. For now, however, Scarlet was careful to pull her jeans down to cover as many of the jewels as she could.

Scarlet stood where she'd landed, in a Wishworld meadow filled with green grass and yellow flowers, canopied by a bright blue sky. In the distance, she could see a sharp steeple and the starkly angled rooftops of what looked like a small town.

*So strange…*she thought as she looked around. *And so…uncomfortable, as well.*

She sensed it first on her back…then on the top of her head, under her hood: a deep, inescapable feeling unlike any other she'd ever had. It didn't take away from the excitement of being on Wishworld at last…it just distracted her a bit.

Scarlet pulled down her hood and that helped a little, especially when a light breeze swept through her hair. But the uncomfortable feeling soon returned, stronger than before. Scarlet slipped off her vest and began to fan herself. That made a big difference, she discovered with relief.

Curious, she checked her Star-Zap to see what the temperature was. *Solar flare!* she thought as she realized how much warmer it was there than on Starland. Quickly, she reactivated her Wishworld Outfit Selector and dialed up a tank top.

Ah, much better, she thought.

She wasn't there to worry about her comfort, though, Scarlet reminded herself. She was there to do a job—and, even more important, to prove what she could do! She needed to fix whatever mess Ophelia had made and get a wish granted and wish energy collected as soon as Starlingly possible. Ophelia had already squandered half the time the Wish Orb gave her, so there wasn't a moogle left to waste.

Quickly, she folded up her star and slipped it into her pocket. Then she switched her Star-Zap to locator mode.

"Take me to Ophelia!" she told it, and directions appeared instantly.

To Scarlet's starprise, the directions led her away from the town and into a vast field. It appeared to be full of some kind of crop, from what Scarlet had learned of Wishling ways of growing food. The plants stood in straight rows and were tall—much taller than she—with long, pointy, floppy green leaves. Near each stalk bloomed tight tubelike flowers nearly the size of Scarlet's arm, each with dark silky threads spilling from its top.

They gave off a distinct sweetish scent, too, which made Scarlet's nose begin to twitch….

She stepped forward and bumped right into something. *"Starf!"* she said, stepping back. She stepped forward again. Same thing. As she reached out into the air in front of her, Scarlet's hand encountered a smooth surface. Aha! A smile spread across her face. It was the smooth surface of an invisible tent!

"Ophelia?"

Scarlet knelt down and cautiously parted the flaps of the glitter-covered tent—Ophelia's glitter-covered invisibility-cloaked tent, to be exact. As she did, a glittery, wide-eyed, freckled face peered out with a tiny panicked squeal.

"*Eeh!* Oh! *Oh,* thank *stars* you're here!" Ophelia gasped, bursting out of the tent and into Scarlet's arms.

Scarlet fell backward onto the star-studded back pockets of her jeans.

"Star apologies!" said Ophelia, clambering off her. "It's just so good to see a friendly—oh…um…to see a familiar face, at least."

Indeed, Scarlet's face was far from friendly then. She could feel the irritation hot beneath her sneer. "What in the stars are you doing in your tent, Ophelia? And please tell me you've changed your appearance and you don't still look like *that* to everyone here…." Scarlet knew Starlings always looked glittery to each other, no matter where they were or what form they assumed. Something, though, about the way Ophelia was flashing and hiding made Scarlet think she just might look glittery to Wishlings, too.

Ophelia looked down at her shimmering skin and wrung her hands, which only amplified their glow. "Those answers go together, I guess." She looked up miserably and gulped.

"You were supposed to change your appearance and find your Wisher!" Scarlet said, disgusted. "Did you try to do *either* of those things?"

Ophelia nodded meekly. "I tried. But I don't know…nothing seemed to work…." She pulled out her Star-Zap and showed it to Scarlet. "This was supposed to help me change my appearance, right?"

Scarlet nodded.

"Well, nothing happened…."

"What do you mean 'nothing'? It's so easy….No Wishworld Outfit Selector, either?"

Ophelia shook her head. "And when I asked it to take me to my Wisher…"

"What? What did it say?"

"It said, 'Reply hazy. Ask again.'"

"So did you?"

"Only a hydrong times," Ophelia groaned. "Finally, I just tried to go and find her in that little town on my own."

"Like *that*?" Scarlet asked, looking Ophelia up and down.

"Well…what else could I do?" she said meekly. "But I didn't try for very long. Everyone was staring and asking me questions like 'Is there a circus in town?' and 'Are you a clown?' What's a circus and what's a clown, anyway?"

"Um, they're like royalty," Scarlet guessed, since she didn't know.

"Oh." Ophelia nodded. "So, anyway, I gave up because of that. And because of this thing, too." She held her hand out toward Scarlet. On her wrist was a thick yellow bracelet studded with star-shaped jewels.

"Is that your Wish Pendant?"

Ophelia nodded. "Pretty, isn't it?" She sighed.

"Did it ever glow?"

Ophelia shook her head. "Not even a little," she replied. "I thought it was because I couldn't find my Wisher, but now I'm not so sure that it's not broken, too….But anyway, that's why I'm here." She gazed at the field around her tent. "I didn't know where else to go, and at least my Star-Zap could do this. I really wanted to make this mission succeed. Truly, Scarlet, I did." She sniffed. "I didn't mean to fail." Her glittery orange eyelashes fluttered as glittery orange tears welled in her eyes. "I'm just so happy to see you, Scarlet! Truly, I am! How in the stars did you know to come?" She paused as another question suddenly popped into her head. "But why…how is it *you*, Scarlet? I thought…" She stopped and bit her thumb.

"It's okay. Go ahead and say it," said Scarlet. "You thought I'd been kicked out of the group for good? You're right. I was. But I never should have been. It was all a big mistake."

"So you're back in?" exclaimed Ophelia. She wiped her tears and began to grin. "That's starmendous! I'm so happy for you! And so relieved…" She sighed. "So. Shall I wait here while you go find the Wisher and grant her wish so we can go home?"

"I wish," Scarlet muttered.

Ophelia looked confused.

"It's still your wish," Scarlet told her. She shrugged as Ophelia's smile of relief collapsed. "Hey, don't blame me. I don't make the rules. According

to Lady Stella, I'm here to help. That's all."

Ophelia gestured toward her Starling garments, then to her fluorescent-orange pigtails.

"Here." Scarlet dialed up APPEARANCE TRANSFORMATION on her Star-Zap and placed it in Ophelia's hand. "Try mine and see what happens."

Ophelia clutched it tightly, holding her breath.

"Recite the mantra!" Scarlet reminded her. "And put one hand on your bracelet!"

"Oh, right…Star light, star bright, first star I…"

"See tonight."

"See tonight. I wish I may, I wish I might, have this wish I…"

"Wish!"

"Wish…tonight."

Scarlet watched with more irritation than relief as the sparkle finally drained from Ophelia's skin and hair like sand through an hourglass.

She noticed a bit of loose glitter clinging to her arms and the frizzy ends of her dull orange pigtails.

"Shake," Scarlet told Ophelia.

She did.

"How do I look?" Ophelia asked, rubbing her newly green eyes and inspecting her pale pink fingernails.

"Dull," Scarlet replied approvingly. "Now dial up the Wishworld Outfit Selector and let's get out of here. See that?" She pointed to the steadily counting-down timer in the Star-Zap's upper left corner. "That's how much time we have left to grant this wish. One moogle longer and the mission fails."

Ophelia gasped. "But…isn't that less than a Wishworld week?"

Scarlet shook her head. "More like less than a Wishworld day."

"Oh, I hope we can grant it," said Ophelia. "It will be so hard to go back if we don't…."

Scarlet laughed. She couldn't help it. Ophelia had so much still to learn.

"What's so funny?"

"Don't be silly," said Scarlet. "You'll just use your star." Scarlet sighed. This was way worse than she had imagined.

"My star?" Before, Ophelia had looked anxious. Now she simply looked confused.

“Your star,” said Scarlet. “The one that you came on. The one you have folded up in your backpack…Wait. What? No! Don’t tell me you don’t!”

Ophelia shook her head slowly—once in each direction. Her mouth trembled, but no sound came out.

“Well, where is it? What did you do with it?” asked Scarlet. She groaned. “Oh, don’t tell me you let it fizzle out!”

“I didn’t mean to…” said Ophelia, sniffling back tears. “Nobody told me about folding it up….”

CHAPTER 10

No working Star-Zap…No shooting star…Was it even possible for Ophelia to get back to Starland, Scarlet wondered, even if they found Ophelia's Wisher and somehow she granted her wish in time? They could use Scarlet's Star-Zap to lead them in the right direction, at least, which Scarlet quickly had them do. But how, if every other Star Darling so far had collected less energy than she'd hoped to on her mission, could an incompetent Starling like Ophelia ever collect enough to enable Scarlet's star and Star-Zap to take them both home?

The answer, Scarlet realized, was that it wasn't her problem! And she couldn't help smiling as she thought about it more. Sure, it would be too bad if a wish didn't get granted. Scarlet valued the energy wishes produced as much as anyone else. And yet…if it meant Ophelia was stuck on Wishworld and out of the cosmos at least for a little while, that would also mean Scarlet's Star Darling status would return and her reputation would undoubtedly be redeemed. And Scarlet would just make up for the energy loss on her own mission, when the next Wish Orb chose her!

The thought burned so brightly in Scarlet's mind she couldn't think about anything else, including the quaint, quiet Wishworld town she and Ophelia soon found themselves in.

“Moon and stars…” Ophelia murmured as she hung close by Scarlet’s side. She’d tried to link arms with Scarlet but had instantly sensed her mistake. “Wishworld is so much different than Starland City. Somehow, I thought they’d be more alike.”

“This *town* is different,” Scarlet agreed as she, too, took in the scene. Unlike the gleaming high-rise-filled Starland capital that went on for floozels—not including the suburbs, which stretched beyond that for floozels more—the Wishworld town appeared to be built around a single two-way street lined with tidy little stores. Scarlet read some of the signs in the windows and above the rectangular glass doors: LEE’S HARDWARE, GRANNY’S TOYS AND GAMES, MARVIN’S LUNCHEONETTE, ANNIE’S FUDGE AND ICE CREAM SHOPPE. She wasn’t sure what every word meant, but she felt like she got the idea.

A few dull yet cheerful adult Wishlings strolled along the sidewalks, greeting one another as they passed. “Hey, there,” a man said warmly to Scarlet and Ophelia. He was pushing a cart full of folded papers and rectangular packages. Those were covered with paper, too. He stopped at the corner by a large blue boxy container with a slightly dented rounded lid. The Starlings watched him reach into the pocket of his short blue pants and pull out a key on a cord. He used it to open a door in the side of the box, where he found *more* paper.

“He’s one of the Wishlings who asked me about the circus,” whispered Ophelia. But he didn’t seem too curious about her anymore. If he or any of the Wishlings in the town thought Ophelia or Scarlet looked out of place, they were not letting on.

“This seems like a small town,” Scarlet told Ophelia. “I don’t think all cities on Wishworld are this size. Just like on Starland, there are all different kinds. Have you ever been to Solar Springs?”

“Solar Springs?”

“You know, where Gemma and Tessa are from?”

Ophelia shook her head.

Scarlet shrugged. “You’re not missing much. It’s a lot like this place. So where *have* you been?” she asked.

Ophelia tapped her fingers together. “Nowhere,” she replied. “I’ve never been outside of Starland City before. I mean, until now.”

“Not even Old Prism?” Old Prism was the original Starland settlement and the most popular tourist destination on Starland. Nearly every family

took at least one vacation there.

But not Ophelia's family, evidently. She looked down and shook her head in reply.

"I didn't mean to make you feel bad," Scarlet assured her. "Star apologies. I'm just starprised. You know, you're lucky you don't have parents like mine who dragged you all over Starland with them."

"Do you really think? I think you're lucky to *have* parents," said Ophelia. She added, "I never actually got to know mine."

Scarlet caught a breath and swallowed it. Those were not words she'd expected to hear. She instantly wished she could take her own words back. But it was too late. *Now what?* she thought. How was she supposed to respond to something like that? *So you're an orphan? You need parents? Feel free to take mine!* Scarlet had never been good at finding the right thing to say. That kind of stuff was hard.

Luckily, she didn't have to say anything, because Ophelia said something first.

"Stars! Look! Palm scanners!" Ophelia pointed across the street at a square yellow box set on top of a pole. Inside, a big red hand flashed on and off. There was another one, they noticed, on their own corner, high above their heads. And they did resemble palm scanners—in some ways, Scarlet thought—but something about them wasn't quite right. First of all, yes, they were much, much too high for a Wishling palm to reach. Plus, there were no doors to be opened that Scarlet could see.

"I wonder how you reach them," said Ophelia. She stood on her toes and stretched her hand as far up to the one on their corner as it would go. Still, there was more than an arm's length between her hand and the red one, even when she jumped.

"Let's figure that out later," said Scarlet, "when we have to."

"Right," said Ophelia. "Of course."

Just then, a large yellow Wishling vehicle rolled past them on those round black things that Wishlings called…whorls? Wools? Whirls?

"That's a school bus!" said Scarlet. "And look! Here come some more."

"What's a school bus?" asked Ophelia.

"Are you serious?" said Scarlet.

She was.

"They're like starbuses, but they roll along on the ground instead of hovering above it. They take Wishling students to school when they don't

already live there."

"Oh! So we're getting close to a school?"

"Very close," said Scarlet. She looked down the street at a large tan building with a tall gray pole planted in front of it.

"Look, Scarlet! Stars!" said Ophelia, pointing to the flag up at the top.

There wasn't enough breeze to keep the tricolored banner flying, but now and then it caught a gust. Scarlet saw the stars and instantly counted half a hydrong.

"So is that a school?" Ophelia asked as they watched the first yellow bus and several more exactly like it turn in and pull to a stop in front of the building.

Scarlet nodded and checked her Star-Zap. It was precisely where their directions led.

"It's so quiet. Where are all the Wishlings?" said Ophelia.

That was when they heard the bell. It came from inside the school, but even from that far away the ringing hurt their ears.

"What was that?" Ophelia asked Scarlet just as the doors to the school burst open and a flood of young Wishlings came pouring out.

Scarlet and Ophelia stood and watched lines form beside each school bus while other Wishlings simply walked away….

"Oh, stars! Did we miss the school day?" Ophelia said with a gasp. "Is everyone going home? What are we going to do? I'll never find my Wishling now!"

"Not if you stand here like that, you won't," muttered Scarlet, grabbing her by the arm. She dragged Ophelia toward the school and pointed to her bracelet. "Keep an eye on your Wish Pendant!" she reminded her, sure that she'd forget. "We'll know we've found your Wishling as soon as it starts to glow."

Scarlet eyed Ophelia's bracelet, too, as they hurried past each bus. The lines outside the vehicles had all but disappeared. Engines were revving and drivers were calling, "All right! Find a seat and sit in it back there!"

"Superstar! There it goes!" said Scarlet as the bracelet blinked. "Your Wisher must be on this bus!" A moogle later she sighed. "Oh…no…The sun just caught a facet. It isn't glowing. Never mind."

She turned as a group of girls brushed past them, then paused by the closest bus. One girl was quite tall by Wishling standards, with laser-straight rows of tight black braids. The others were of average Wishling

height. One had straight fair hair that hung smoothly down her back. The other's hair was dark and thick and curly and seemed to defy the basic rules of Wishworld gravity that Scarlet had learned in school.

"So you're sure you can't come home with us?" that girl was saying.

"Sorry. I really am," the tall girl said. "I have…all these chores to do today."

The fair-haired girl sighed heavily.

"You know this project is due on Friday," the first girl said. "And we're *all* supposed to contribute. This is a big part of our grade."

"Yeah. A *big* part." The other girl flipped her pale hair back with a toss of her head. "And we're doing *all* the work. I mean, I wish you'd said something about all these doctors' appointments and your piano recital—and today's chores—when we started on this."

"I…I…"

"If it's just chores, can't you do them later?" said the curly-haired girl. "Won't your mom understand if you just explain?"

The tall girl chewed on either side of her bottom lip. "Well, you see… it's my *step*mom…and, well, she's, like, *soooo* mean."

"Oh…"

"Sorry…"

The two girls nodded sympathetically.

The tall girl heaved a heavy sigh, as if that was the story of her life.

"So what about *tomorrow*?" The girl with the fair hair asked more gently. "Can you at least come home with us then? If the chrysalises start hatching today, like I think they will, we'll have our butterflies and that'll be it."

"Oh, I hope they hatch today!" said the curly-haired girl.

"I know, right? I can't *wait*!" Her blond friend clapped quickly, as if beating a snare drum. "*Ooh!* You know what we should do? We should have a big butterfly party and celebrate!"

"Yes!"

The two traded *aha* grins while the third girl looked down at her shoes.

"Your stepmom would let you do that, wouldn't she?" the blond girl asked.

The tall girl shrugged. "I don't know….She's so mean, like I said…."

"All aboard!" the bus driver called down through the door just then. Both girls looked up and waved.

“Coming.” The curly-haired girl turned back to the tall girl. “See you tomorrow, I guess, Arden.”

“See you tomorrow, Chloe. Bye, Sydney.”

“If the butterflies hatch, we’ll text you.”

“Great. Yes, definitely do.”

“Um…sorry…about your stepmom and all….”

“Thanks…” the girl murmured. “It’s kind of hard.”

“It’s her!” Scarlet leaned over and hissed to Ophelia, more into her pigtail than her ear.

“Do you really think so? How do you know?” Ophelia turned to her. “Are you sure?”

Scarlet twisted her mouth in irritation. “Check your Wish Pendant and you’ll see. I’ll bet my stars it’s that *stepmother*.” Her eyes narrowed at the thought. “It’s a classic Wishworld wish! She’s probably been wishing to get rid of her…once and for all. But that’s an impossible wish. *Well?*” She nodded toward Ophelia’s wrist. “What are you waiting for? Check your bracelet!” Why she was so eager for Ophelia to find her Wisher, Scarlet didn’t know. Just a few moogles earlier, she had wanted desperately for Ophelia to fail—but now, oddly, not so much.

She was as sure as a sundial the bracelet would be glowing like a fiery flare. But no…the star-shaped jewels on the bracelet were as lifeless as they had been before.

“I thought we’d found her. Didn’t you?” Scarlet looked over her shoulder at the tall girl, still so close to them, watching her friends’ bus pull away.

“Maybe she is my Wisher,” said Ophelia. “Maybe, just like my Star-Zap, my Wish Pendant is powerless, too….” She looked down at her wrist in frustration. Then, suddenly, her head bent farther down. “Did you bring a glowworm here with you from Starland?” she asked, pointing toward the ground.

“What?”

“You’re glowing. There, on your ankle. Under your…what do you call those again?”

“Jeans,” said Scarlet, distracted, as she followed Ophelia’s eyes. Her ankle *was* glowing…even through the heavy pants!

She yanked up her cuff to discover the hot-pink star-buckles on her own Wish Pendant boots shining like quasars on her feet.

She looked up at Ophelia. “It’s not a glowworm, it’s my Wish Pendant.”

Ophelia’s eyes were as round as moons. “Why is *your* Wish Pendant glowing?”

“Don’t ask *me*! *How should I know?*”

CHAPTER 11

The next thing Scarlet knew, her Wish Pendant faded from twinkling star to flat pink stone.

"What happened?" gasped Ophelia.

"I don't know…." Could it have been some sort of false alarm? Then she looked up to see the tall girl had moved and was walking down the street. The Wisher just wasn't close. That was how Wish Pendants behaved.

"Come on. You've got to catch her!" Scarlet snapped at Ophelia as she hurried to follow the girl.

"Star greetings, Wishling."

The tall girl stopped midstride on the chalky gray sidewalk. "Excuse me?" she said, slowly turning, with a stiff note of dread in her voice.

Ophelia, who'd offered the greeting, covered her mouth with one hand. "Sorry! Forgot!" she whispered to Scarlet.

"Hi." Scarlet looked back up and smiled at the Wishling. "Sorry." She pointed her thumb toward Ophelia. "My friend here thinks she's so funny when she says weird things like that."

The girl's eyes skipped back and forth between Scarlet and Ophelia. "Sorry, but do I know you? Do you go to this school?"

"No," said Ophelia innocently before Scarlet could stop her.

Scarlet smiled as she gritted her teeth. Had they been on Starland, sparks would have been shooting straight out of her ears.

"What she means is no, this isn't our regular school," Scarlet explained hurriedly. "But *temporarily*, yes, we go here." She checked to make sure Ophelia was listening carefully. "We're *exchange* students, you see."

"Really? That's so cool. Where are you from?" the girl asked.

"Where are we from?" *Good question*, thought Scarlet as her mind suddenly went blank. She tried to remember some of the names of places she'd learned in Wishworld Relations, names she'd imagined using on missions just like this hydrongs and hydrong of times….

"Orion!" Ophelia blurted, lifting her chin and looking proud.

"Orion? Where is that?" asked the girl.

"It's just up there in the—"

Scarlet pulled Ophelia's arm down from above her head and put her other hand over Ophelia's startled mouth. "Did you think she said *Orion*? She said *Ohio*!" Scarlet laughed.

"Oh." The girl nodded, then grinned with a friendly shrug. "Well, welcome to Florida, I guess. I'm Arden. Nice to meet you."

"Hi. I'm Scarlet, and this is Ophelia. Nice to meet you, too," Scarlet replied before Ophelia could speak. She wasn't quite sure how Ophelia would have answered that introduction. She only knew somehow it would have been wrong.

"If you like, I could show you around," Arden offered.

"Really? That would be startastic!" exclaimed Ophelia.

Scarlet swallowed a groan and closed her eyes.

"Would you excuse us for just a minute?" Scarlet asked the girl, who shrugged.

Scarlet dragged Ophelia away from Arden by her backpack. "Ophelia!" she muttered. "You have to stop saying things like 'startastic' and 'star greetings.' Those are Starland phrases. Wishlings say things like 'awesome' and 'sick.' It's one of the first things we learned. Remember? Back in Wishers 101. What have you been learning at Starling Academy, anyway?"

"Star apologies…" mumbled Ophelia. "I guess I just forgot."

"Well, start remembering!" hissed Scarlet. "Or better yet, don't say anything else. Just let me do the talking. Okay? You worry about focusing all your energy on granting Arden's wish." She quickly checked her Star-Zap. "This clock is counting down very fast!"

"Yes. Okay." Ophelia nodded, and Scarlet hoped she understood. Scarlet wasn't sure how she'd gone from thinking it might be all right if Ophelia failed to being determined to see her succeed. It was almost as if she had no choice but to make the mission work.

"Is everything okay?" Arden asked when Scarlet and Ophelia returned.

"Everything is great."

"So, what do you think? Do you want to hang out? Do you want me to show you around? What haven't you seen yet?" asked Arden. "I know it's a pretty small town, but we have a really nice park. It's kind of famous for its butterfly attraction…er, um…but we can skip that part. It's not really all that great."

"Thanks," said Scarlet. "That sounds really nice. Really, it does. But…"

"But what?" Arden asked.

Scarlet tried to assume the expression she'd seen the other girls give Arden before—the one that seemed to say, "I feel so sorry for you, poor girl."

"You probably have to go straight home," said Scarlet.

"No," said Arden. "Not really." She smiled and shook her head. "I mean, I have to go home eventually, but later on—by dinnertime—not, like, right away."

Scarlet was confused and could tell that her face showed it. "Are you *sure*? I'd hate for you to get in trouble with your stepmother."

"How did you know I have a stepmother?"

"Er…I guessed, I guess?"

"Wow. Good guess," said Arden, who looked surprised but not upset.

"You probably wish you didn't have one," Scarlet went on, nodding. "Or at least that she wasn't so mean." She snuck a wink at Ophelia, then watched as Arden's expression slowly changed.

"No, my stepmother's great. She's not at all mean. In fact—don't tell my mom this—but she's nicer than her sometimes."

Now it was Scarlet's turn to flip expressions. "But doesn't she make you stay home? And do all the chores? You know, and work all day and night?"

Arden's nose wrinkled and she started to giggle. "What are you talking about?" She looked down at her red ruffled skirt and sleeveless yellow tee. "Do I look like Cinderella? The only chores my stepmom makes me do are the dishes, sometimes, and make my bed…not that I ever do."

"But…"

Arden waited for Scarlet to finish, but Scarlet wasn't sure how to go on. Why had this Wishling told those others that she had a mean stepmother if she didn't? And most important, what was her wish, then? To have a *mean* stepmother? No, of course not. Why would any Wishling want that?

So then what could it be? Scarlet tried to think. She glanced at Ophelia, who was blank-faced, clearly trying to catch up. She wasn't going to be much help in figuring this out; Scarlet could tell from her frown. Then something else that Scarlet had heard before suddenly popped into her head —something about doctors' appointments….

Of course! That had to be it!

There were no doctors on Starland, of course. There simply was no need. All the positive wish energy on Starland kept Starlings healthy throughout their Cycle of Life, until they began their afterglow. But Scarlet had learned in school about Wishworld doctors and all they did for Wishlings whenever they got sick. She'd also learned about the kinds of wishes that Wishlings often made when doctors couldn't help. Of course, those were impossible wishes, and maybe that was why Ophelia was having so much trouble. But Scarlet was sure they could help her make a more appropriate one.

"You're not well, are you?"

"Excuse me?"

"You're sick. Well, don't worry. We'll find a way…"

"But I'm *not* sick. I'm fine. Really. Why?" the girl asked, touching her cheeks. "Do I look bad or something?"

"No, no. You look good. It's not that," Scarlet said. What could she say now? If the Wisher wasn't sick and her stepmother wasn't mean, what wishes were left? Had she also said something about a piano recital?

Or…could it be that she wasn't their Wisher at all?

What a starmendous waste of time!

Scarlet looked down to check her Wish Pendant. It was still glowing… which was odd. But it wasn't like this was *her* mission, so maybe it didn't mean anything.

"Omigosh," the girl said suddenly, as if a holo-text had just come through. "I get it." She turned to Ophelia. "You must have heard me talking to Chloe and Sydney."

Ophelia's cheeks filled like balloons as she worked to keep the words in.

"Yeah," Arden went on, not needing a reply. "Some of those things I said back there…they weren't exactly true."

"But *why*?" Ophelia blurted. "It sounded like they needed your help."

That was actually a good question, Scarlet thought, so that time she let it go.

"Oh…it's complicated," said Arden. She sighed and looked away.

"They're mean girls," said Scarlet knowingly. It was a common basis for wishes, unfortunately, but those weren't too hard to grant.

"No," said Arden. "They're fine. They're really nice and fun. And I want to be their friend. That's why I *wanted* to be in their lab group for this science project."

"Oh," Scarlet said, confused. Was this something Wishlings often did, she wondered—fail to make any sense?

"I didn't know they'd want to study butterflies…." As she said that, Arden winced.

"What's wrong with butterflies?" said Scarlet.

"Are you afraid of them?" Ophelia asked.

Scarlet turned to Ophelia and did all she could not to roll her eyes. "Of course she's not afraid of *butterflies*!" she muttered. Could a Starling be more dim?

"I know," said Arden. "It's ridiculous, isn't it? But I can't help it. Do you know, I can't even look at pictures of butterflies without wanting to throw up? I tried to suggest other topics, but they were so into the idea. And they'd already ordered the caterpillar kit and everything. There was nothing I could say or do. Their minds were totally set."

"Did you tell them you were scared?" asked Scarlet. That seemed easy enough to do.

Arden nodded. "I tried to. But they thought it was a joke. They just laughed and said stuff like 'Can you imagine? Afraid of butterflies!'"

"So…they *are* mean," said Scarlet.

"No, they weren't being mean at all. They thought I was being funny. They thought it had to be a joke." Arden kicked a rock and sent it bouncing off the curb and into the street. "I guess I could have told them I was serious…except then, instead of laughing at the idea, they would have laughed at me."

"So what are you going to do?" Scarlet asked. She reached for Ophelia and pulled her near. She could sense a wish a breath away and wanted to

make sure Ophelia heard it.

"What I've been doing, I guess: making up excuses to stay away. So I'll get an F on the project and Chloe and Sydney will never talk to me again. But what else *can* I do? I *wish* I wasn't afraid of butterflies…but we all know wishing doesn't help." She took a few steps away to kick another rock while Scarlet hung back and pumped her fist.

Yes! she thought as a sharp but not unpleasant jolt ran up and down her spine.

Scarlet turned to wink at Ophelia, but Ophelia's eyes were on the ground.

"Ophelia!" Scarlet nudged her with an elbow. "Your Wisher just voiced her wish! She doesn't want to be afraid of butterflies!" she hissed.

"Really? Oh! Sorry," Ophelia said. She glanced over her shoulder at Arden. "What do I do now? Oh…and what are butterflies? Are they, like, wings or something you can put on toasted Wishling bread?"

CHAPTER 12

After a quick explanation of what butterflies were ("They're basically like flutterfocuses, only they don't change color or light up."), Scarlet told Ophelia her plan.

"It's easy. We learned about these kinds of fear wishes in Wish Fulfillment, remember? No? Right. Of course you don't. Never mind. Basically, we have to get her to talk more about her fear and where it comes from. Then we have to reassure her that butterflies mean her no harm. Then we need to introduce her to butterflies. It's supposed to be little by little… but of course we don't have a lot of time. Luckily, there's that butterfly attraction she talked about—which is perfect! We just take her there! *Zap!* Done!"

"Talk, reassure, introduce," said Ophelia. She nodded so her pigtails bounced like springs. "Star salutations, Scarlet. I'll try. I really will." Ophelia's chin was trembling, but she managed a smile. And somehow, before Scarlet could help herself, she was returning a grin.

Scarlet could feel it inside her….*Ew!* Something was warming up and softening, like stars melting into thick molten glass. Scarlet tried to will it all back into sharp jagged crystals, but no—it was too late.

It was easy to be mad at Ophelia for taking her place, and even easier to scold her for making so many mistakes. And yet this whole situation wasn't

Ophelia's fault any more than it was Scarlet's. The most important thing, whether Scarlet liked it or not, was to help Ophelia as much as she could to make Arden's wish come true.

"No," Scarlet told Ophelia sternly. "You're a Star Darling. You need to do more than try. You need to grant this wish. So go!" She pointed to Arden, who was walking away. "What are you waiting for?"

They caught up to Arden at the corner. She grinned at them warily. "So now you know my secret. You probably think I'm super weird."

"What are you talking about?" said Scarlet. "Everyone's scared of something. Take Ophelia here." She shot a quick nod at her partner.

"Me? Oh, yes! *Me!* I'm afraid of everything!" Ophelia said. "Black holes…asteroids…gamma radiation…and even those energy bunnies that collect under the bed."

Scarlet and Arden both stared at her, speechless.

"Anyway," Scarlet said. "Being scared is nothing to be ashamed of. But it is something you can try to change."

"How?"

"Why don't we go to that park you were talking about," said Scarlet, "and talk about it there?"



The park was a short walk from the school, away from downtown. A dark metal arch marked the entrance at a corner where two roads crossed.

"Wait!" Arden grabbed Scarlet's and Ophelia's arms as they reached the corner across from it, just before they stepped off the curb. She pointed to the palm scanner across the street and the big bright red hand that was flashing at them.

"Right. The palm scanners," said Ophelia. "But I couldn't reach it. Can you?"

She started to jump as she'd done before in town, to reach the box above them. Scarlet almost joined her. But then she saw Arden laughing—not meanly, just as if they were all in on a joke. Clearly, Ophelia was way off. That wasn't a palm scanner at all. But if Ophelia was helping lift Arden's mood, why not play along?

"*Very* funny," said Scarlet. She chuckled and grabbed for Ophelia's arm. Just then, the hand stopped blinking and began to glow a steady red. As it

did, a car whizzed past them, followed by another and more after that.

Scarlet watched Arden press a button on the side of the post on their corner, then read the small sign next to it: PUSH BUTTON TO WALK. A moogle later, the hand disappeared and was replaced by a white symbol of a walking man.

"Are you coming?" said Arden as she stepped off the sidewalk and into the street. "The light's going to change back if we don't hurry up."

"So…it's not a palm scanner?" Ophelia whispered to Scarlet as they followed. "I'm sorry. I messed up again."

"Hey, she's smiling," said Scarlet, nodding ahead. "I think you might actually have done something right."

"So this is our park," Arden said as they walked through the arch. She lifted her arms and stretched them out to her sides, turning slightly left and right. "It's small, but it's pretty nice."

It *was* nice, Scarlet had to agree, in an overly green Wishworld way. It was strange, and almost refreshing, to see grass so singular in color—and such straight paths that refused to move. It was actually nice to get away from all the glitter and sparkle of Starland and appreciate not just how colorful and brilliant things were but other qualities, as well. Like how the little brown creature on the branch high above them sounded, whistling its curious tune.

And the way the grass smelled. Scarlet took a deep whiff, which Arden noticed. She nodded as if she understood.

"They must have just mowed."

Ah, thought Scarlet. So that was what that sharp tangy scent was. Scarlet didn't even know how the grass on Starland smelled, she realized, or if it smelled at all. Starland grass always stayed the perfect length, so it never had to be cut.

Ophelia, meanwhile, was pointing at a large dull but colorful, oddly shaped structure behind a green metal fence. At the center was an elevated platform sheltered by a yellow roof. Along with a ladder, there appeared to be several other means by which to reach the platform: a winding blue ramp; a slick yellow pole; a thick knotted rope; and, last but not least, a long sloping red tube, out of which a small Wishling boy abruptly popped.

"What's that?" Ophelia asked.

"What's what?" Arden replied. Her eyes darted from pole to ramp to tube, not quite sure what Ophelia could mean.

Scarlet pulled Ophelia close. “It’s a playground. A *Wishling* playground,” she clarified. She had seen them before from the Wishworld Surveillance Deck, but Ophelia obviously had not. If she had, she would have known that Wishling playgrounds were nothing like those on Starland, with their gyro-seesaws and antigravity slides and energy trampolines. There was one apparatus Starland and Wishworld shared, however, and Scarlet pointed it out to Ophelia. “See?”

Ophelia’s eyes followed Scarlet’s away from the platform, along a track of evenly spaced metal bars to a triangular frame from which hung three rubber slings on chunky black chains.

“Lucky stars! *Swings!*” Ophelia exclaimed. “Can we?” She turned to Arden first, then Scarlet. “I love swings so much!”

“Now?” Scarlet said. “*Really?* We came here to *talk*, Ophelia, remember? *Not* play.”

“Star a—So sorry. Yes. Of course.”

“We could do both,” Arden said, shrugging. “I mean, why not? I haven’t been on a swing in years.” She grinned, suddenly looking happier than she had since they had met. “No one else is using them. It’ll be fun. C’mon! Let’s go!” She left Ophelia and Scarlet to follow as she headed toward the playground gate.

“Star apologies. Truly,” Ophelia murmured to Scarlet. She scrunched her freckled nose. “I didn’t mean to delay the mission further. Don’t worry. I won’t do it again.”

Ophelia dropped her backpack next to Arden’s just inside the fence.

“Oh, no…” said Scarlet, eyeing it.

“What now?” Ophelia moaned. “What did I do?”

“You lost your key chain. I don’t know what it’s for. But I’m sure we’ll find out now.” Each Star Darling had received a glittery stuffed star attached to her backpack. Wishers called them “key chains.”

“What key chain?” said Ophelia. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Didn’t you get one right before takeoff?”

“Nooo…” Ophelia said slowly. “No,” she repeated, more surely.

“Oh…” said Scarlet. “Good,” she declared. One less thing to worry about, at least.

They turned to watch Arden skip up to the middle swing and fall into the hard rubber seat with a smile.

“Well,” Scarlet whispered to Ophelia with the barest of smiles, “what are you waiting for? Let’s go.”

By the time they joined Arden, the Wishling was flying back and forth, her feet nearly extending past the bar overhead.

Excited, Ophelia took the swing on Arden’s right, gripping the chains extra tight in each hand. *“Wheeee!”* she cried as she leaned her head back and eagerly kicked out her feet. After a moogle, however, she sat back up. “Aw…mine’s broken,” she said.

“Mine, too,” said Scarlet. It hadn’t moved a shortsnip since she’d sat down. She raised her feet once more, just to be extra sure…but no, it did not want to move.

Between them, Arden slowed until her own swing was barely swaying. “What do you mean they’re broken?” She gave Scarlet’s chain a little tug, then peered behind her at the seat. “It looks okay to me.”

“Oh, that part’s fine, yes. It’s the swinger,” explained Scarlet. “It’s not working.” She lifted her feet again. “See? It doesn’t fly like yours. It just sits here. Whatever.” She shrugged. “It’s no big…what do they say…deal?”

“You know, you have to *pump* to swing,” said Arden. “You know…like this….”

Scarlet watched Arden lean back and kick her legs out, exactly as Ophelia had done. But unlike Ophelia, Arden didn’t stop there. That was only the first step, it seemed. Arden next swung her body forward and sharply bent her knees. Scarlet watched the swing respond by gliding backward, at which point Arden leaned back again. As she kept going like that, whipping herself back and forth, she made her swing fly higher…and higher…and higher still!

Who would have ever thought that Wishlings had to power their own swings? thought Scarlet.

Fortunately, this “pumping” wasn’t half as difficult as it looked. Even Ophelia was successful almost immediately, much to her delight. Scarlet could have used a push to start, but after a few rough kicks and bends, she quickly began to catch up.

They all stopped at just about the same time but for different reasons: Ophelia because her Star-Zap fell out of her pocket when she practically flew upside down; Arden because she saw it fall and wanted to stop and help; Scarlet because as soon as she saw Arden reach for the Star-Zap, she knew she had to grab it—fast!

“Cool phone!” said Arden, who was already out of her swing and running her finger along the Star-Zap. Instantly, the top flipped up.

Scarlet’s heart nearly stopped as she stared at it, terrified that a holo-something would suddenly appear. Only after a moogle did she remember that it had no energy. *Lucky stars!* she thought with a sigh of relief.

“It’s actually a Star-Z—” Ophelia started to correct her.

“A Star-Zee?” Scarlet cut in, laughing. “Honestly, Ophelia. You make up the funniest names.” She took the Star-Zap from Arden and handed it to Ophelia with a tight, open-eyed smile. “Here you go. Maybe put that in your backpack, why don’t you. And keep it there. You’d hate for your *phone* here to break.”

“Right…” said Ophelia. “Right! My *phone*!” She ran over to her backpack and dropped it in. She returned to the swing set, out of breath. “Better?” she asked with a grin.

Scarlet nodded. “Much better. Now.” She sighed. “I think it’s time we *talked*, don’t you?” She turned to Arden and put her hands on her shoulders. “Here,” she said. “Have a seat.” Gently, she guided her back into her swing, then sank into her own. She didn’t have to look at the Countdown Clock on her Star-Zap to know that there wasn’t much time left in their mission. She could see the sun drifting steadily down toward the treetops. That meant there wasn’t a moogle to waste.

“We’re going to help you get over this fear of yours,” she told Arden. “But first you need to talk.”

“Talk about what?”

“Your fear,” said Scarlet. “When it started. Where it came from. All that good stuff. So go ahead. Fire away.”

Arden’s face, which had been so warm and open, seemed all of a sudden to hang a CLOSED sign. “My fear of butterflies…oh, no…I don’t want to. It’s too hard to talk about. I just can’t.”

“But…” Scarlet paused to check the sun again. “But you *have* to talk about it,” she blurted.

Scarlet could feel her own face getting hot and probably red—especially when Ophelia spoke up from the next swing: “That’s okay. We understand.”

“Thanks.” Arden twisted her swing toward Ophelia.

“I know what it’s like not to want to talk about something,” Ophelia continued. “You probably do, too, Scarlet. Right?”

"No." Scarlet frowned impatiently. "Well…okay…yes, maybe. Sometimes."

"It's just so embarrassing," said Arden.

Ophelia nodded. "You don't want to be reminded of it. I know."

"It was literally the worst day of my life," said Arden.

"I can only imagine," said Ophelia gently as she rocked her swing from side to side.

Scarlet's eyes, meanwhile, flashed from Ophelia to Arden, as she observed their exchange of trusting smiles. Arden was actually about to talk, Scarlet realized—thanks to Ophelia, no less!

"I was at my grandparents' house—they live on a big farm. And I was little. I'd only just turned five. It was before dinner. I was playing hide-and-seek with my older cousins out in the fields around the barn. We used to do that all the time. So I see this big tree out at the edge of the meadow, and I decide to go hide behind that. The trunk was literally *this* thick." Arden held her arms out wide. "I mean *huge*. Big enough to hide three or four kids…I don't know, maybe more. And so tall that when you stood under it and looked up, you couldn't see the top at all. My grandmother says it was a big tree even when she was a kid, so you can imagine how old it must be now.

"Anyway, I ran up and stood there, hiding behind it—all by myself—while my cousin Jason ran around with no idea, busy finding everyone else. And then…I started hearing this kind of *rustling* sound all around me…kind of like a cat purring, only *really* loud. And the next thing I knew I was covered, I mean literally *covered*, in all these"—Arden shuddered—"all these *butterflies*! Evidently, they were roosting there—thousands of them—on their way to Mexico for the winter. My grandmother says they migrate through her farm every year. Which is why I refuse to go back there, by the way."

"But the butterflies aren't there all the time, are they?" asked Scarlet.

"No. Just the fall, when they're flying south. But just the thought of being there…" She winced and shivered again. "I love my grandparents…but it's just too hard. I get nauseous just thinking about it."

"So what did you do when the flutterfo—I mean butterflies landed on you?" asked Ophelia.

"I screamed. Like crazy," Arden said. "I mean, I was five and all alone. Sure, I realized pretty quickly that they were butterflies, but I still thought they were going to eat me alive. I couldn't get them off. It was like they

were stuck to me with pins. They wouldn't let go with their little"—she cringed—"*feet.* I tried to brush them and shake them and knock them off, but they were in my hair, my clothes, everything, refusing to let go. Then, finally, I tried to run. But of course I couldn't see. So I tripped…and fell… and landed on the ground, on, like, a hundred of them." She paused to take a breath. "Basically killing them all. So there I am, lying on all these dead butterflies, covered with hundreds more. All by myself. Screaming. Crying. Oh—and I wet my pants, I was so scared. Did I happen to mention that?"

"Aw…" Ophelia patted her shoulder.

Scarlet leaned forward. "So what happened next?"

"Finally—after what literally felt like forever—my cousins and my grandma found me. By then, the butterflies had gone back up in the tree—except for the ones I murdered, of course. When they found out what happened, my cousins laughed and called me 'butterfly bait' for the rest of the weekend. In fact, they still call me that today. It's become a little family joke, that nickname."

"That's terrible!" said Scarlet.

Arden nodded. "Yeah, it is."

"I hope you call them something back!" Scarlet said. "I know some good names, by the way, if you need any suggestions."

"Oh, but I'm sure they don't mean to be mean," said Ophelia. "They probably just don't understand."

Arden hung her head, shaking it slowly. "They sure don't. Nobody does."

"We do," Ophelia said softly. "We know exactly how you feel." She glanced over Arden's shoulder at Scarlet. *What should I do next?* she mouthed.

Scarlet tried to think….

Just keep going! she told Ophelia—not with words but by rolling her arm.

"You know what I think?" said Ophelia.

Arden waited to hear.

"I think…I think anybody would be scared of butterflies after that happened to them."

"Thanks," said Arden. She smiled a little. "And thanks for this…."

"For what?"

“For letting me talk about it. To be honest, it feels kind of good. Do you know, I don’t think I’ve ever told anyone that story before? Never, in all these years. And in a way, I think the story I actually remember was a little better than the one I was trying to forget.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I mean, the butterflies were scary—for sure. But for some reason I’d remembered them biting me, like they had little teeth. Now, though, I realize that they didn’t do much more than tickle me.”

“Hey! It’s our turn!”

Scarlet turned, along with the others, to find a long line of young Wishling children standing behind them, looking as if *they* might bite.

“You can’t hog the swings!” said the first one.

“Yeah! No hogging!” chirped another. “Besides, you’re too old. My mom said.”

“Swings are for kids!” they started chanting. “Swings are for kids! Swings are for kids!”

Ophelia shuffled her swing toward Arden’s. “Um, can we get out of here? They scare me.”

Arden laughed. “Yeah, sure. Let’s go.”

CHAPTER 13

"I can't believe I'm doing this," said Arden.

Behind her back, Scarlet and Ophelia leaned in to share a smile of so-close-they-could-taste-it success. They were standing on the path that led to the butterfly exhibit, in front of a sign that read BUTTERFLIES! 200 FEET AHEAD.

"My stars," Ophelia whispered to Scarlet. "Did you know butterflies had two hundred legs?"

Scarlet studied the sign. "I didn't," she whispered back. "It's kind of starmazing that they can fly…."

The wooden sign also had a carving of a butterfly, which Arden was regarding with an anxious expression.

"Don't worry," said Ophelia. "Like we said, if you don't want to go in, you don't have to."

"No, of course not….But let's keep going," Scarlet said.

The path turned, and as it did, the exhibit itself came into view.

"Ooh! It's such a pretty structure!" said Ophelia.

Scarlet had to agree. The side they could see had multiple rising and falling arches, almost like the curves of a cloud. The walls appeared to be made of some kind of netting and were decorated with large colorful pictures of butterflies. No two were the same. Through the net, it was easy

to see a veritable jungle of trees, vines, and blooming bushes growing inside. What they couldn't yet see—from such a distance, Scarlet figured—was any butterflies.

"Just imagine if that place glittered!" said Ophelia. "How stunning it would be!"

"I think they might light it up at night on the weekends," said Arden.

"Really?" Ophelia's face brightened at the thought (as much as a face on Wishworld could).

"Yeah, but I'm not sure. I've never actually seen it. It's just something I've heard."

"Ooh! I'd love to stay and see it. Scarlet, do you think we can?"

"Why couldn't you?" asked Arden.

"Let's just keep going," said Scarlet. "Shall we? I mean, if that's okay?"

Arden nodded. She took a deep breath and moved forward, ever so slowly. Her feet seemed to fight her for every step. Scarlet could hear Arden telling herself, "I can do this. I can…" between rapid shallow breaths.

Yes, Scarlet thought. She *was* going to do this. She was going to overcome her fear. Scarlet looked at Ophelia and pointed to her bracelet. *Be ready!* she mouthed. What was crazier, Scarlet wondered: that Ophelia's mission just might be successful or that Scarlet just might be happy for her?

As they got closer to the exhibit, they found themselves walking among dense vibrant flower gardens dotted with butterfly-shaped signs bearing various facts.

One showed the process a caterpillar went through to become a butterfly.

"'Metamorphosis,'" read Arden. "That's what our project is about."

"Wait? Is that really how butterflies are made? They start out as *those*?" Ophelia pointed to a caterpillar, then to a butterfly. "You'd think something that delicate and pretty would be made of flower petals and stardust."

"You're funny," Arden said. She suddenly looked more relaxed.

Scarlet could see how Ophelia had taken Arden's mind off her fear—without even meaning to—so she decided to try it herself. After all, she *was* there to help.

"This is interesting," she said. "Did you know butterflies don't eat? They can only drink. And they taste with their feet. That's uncommon, right?"

Arden laughed again.

It worked! Scarlet could practically feel the wish energy ready to come out of this Wisher, and she could tell that Ophelia was sensing it, too.

"Oh," Ophelia went on, not really getting the humor in anything but still happy to play along. "And look here. This says that they have four wings, two on each side, and only *six* legs. Not two hundred?" She paused to frown, seriously confused.

"Two *hundred*! You're so funny!" Arden giggled. "Both of you." She stopped in front of another sign. "Ooh," she said. "Check this out. According to this, butterflies can see ultraviolet colors. It helps them know which flowers have the nectar they want. *Hmmm.* What's so special about seeing ultraviolet colors?" She grinned. "I mean, can't everyone?"

"I don't get it," Ophelia whispered to Scarlet.

"You don't have to," Scarlet murmured back. "Just so it works. How about this one?" she said more loudly, pointing to another sign. "This is also about what butterflies see. It says butterflies are attracted to bright colors, especially yellow and red. *Hee-hee!*"

She waited for Arden to laugh…or chuckle…or at least smile. Instead, though, she looked over to see Arden staring down at her bright yellow T-shirt. She touched the hem of her ruby red skirt.

"Er, what's wrong?" Scarlet asked.

"I can't do this."

"But you have to—I mean…yes, you *can*."

"Maybe. But not today. Not dressed like this. What if they land on me? Uh, I thought I was ready. I did. But I'm not. I'm really not." She held out her hands. "Look." They were trembling like leaves in a solar storm.

Scarlet looked over at Ophelia. Did she have an idea? Any idea at all? Scarlet had done everything she could think of to help grant this wish in time, but it just wasn't enough in the end.

With the tiniest nod, Ophelia lowered her eyes back to Arden's hands and gently picked one up. "You know, you're not alone. We're here for you. Whatever you need. Would it help at all if Scarlet and I stayed right by your side and maybe held your hands?" She looked back at Scarlet warmly, clearly expecting her to reach out and take Arden's other hand. "Scarlet?"

"Well…I don't know. Here's the thing. *Would* it help?" Scarlet was skeptical at best. She'd never bought into that whole Starland hand-holding-all-the-time thing. What was the point? She didn't know. To other Starlings, linking arms and holding hands came as naturally as glowing, but to Scarlet

it always felt forced. In fact, getting that close to others just made her feel more alone.

But Ophelia wasn't letting go, and neither was Arden.

Oh, why not? Scarlet finally thought.

She reached out and put her hand lightly on Arden's, surprised at how warm and soft it felt. Arden squeezed, and Scarlet nearly jumped. Instead, though, without even thinking about it, she flashed Arden a smile and squeezed back.

"You know…it's so weird how I met you today," Arden said with a small but grateful smile. "It's almost like a fairy godmother sent you or something."

"Well, *that* sure didn't happen," Scarlet said.

"Close, though." Ophelia grinned, then caught Scarlet's "*Really?"* face. "What? Oh. That's a *joke*."

"So, shall we try this again?" Scarlet said. "Together?"

"Okay." Arden took a deep breath. "Just…don't let go."

Hand in hand, they walked down the last bit of path toward the butterfly building and up to the wide glass door. Inside, they could see the stars of the exhibit: hydrongs and hydrongs of butterflies. Some were tiny, no bigger than a pinky. Others were almost as big as a hand. Some were yellow and black, some were orange, and some were all white. And some were the exact same blue as Vega's hair!

"Now, just so we're clear, if I start to scream or faint or anything like that, we're coming right back out."

"Of course," said Ophelia.

"We've got you," said Scarlet. She placed her other hand on Arden's, as well.

"Okay." Arden took a long and slow breath in, held it, then let it out quickly. "I think I'm ready."

"Wait…what? Oh, no…" groaned Scarlet.

"What's wrong?"

"We have a problem, I'm afraid." Scarlet nodded toward the door—to the sign hanging in the middle, right over the handle, where it was impossible to miss. In the most unsparkly black block letters, it read very simply CLOSED.

"What? What does that mean?" said Ophelia as she read it. "Does that mean we can't go in?"

“That’s totally what it means,” said Arden. “Look.” She pointed to another sign to the side of the door that listed the operating hours. “They’re closed every Thursday. Oh, well. I guess this fear just wasn’t meant to be conquered all in a day. But at least I got a little closer to facing it, right?”

“Right,” Scarlet sighed.

A little closer. Great, she thought. If only energy could be captured from that.

But no. They needed a wish to be fully granted. And they needed it granted soon. Not the next day or that weekend, when Arden suggested they return.

“We’re going in today. Right now,” said Scarlet as she worked to unlock the entrance with her mind. She clasped Arden’s hand more tightly and pulled her toward the door. “We’ve come this far. We can’t stop now. C’mon, Ophelia. You too.”

“What? How? But we can’t. It’s closed!” said Arden, confused but stubbornly holding her ground.

“Um, Scarlet. Scarlet.” On the other side of Arden, Ophelia tried to get Scarlet’s attention by waving wildly with her hand. *“Scarlet!”*

“What? It’s no big deal. We’ll go in and come right back out.”

“But that’s just it. I don’t think we have to,” said Ophelia, pointing.

Scarlet followed her finger to Arden’s shoulder….

“Freakin’ fireballs!” she gasped.

Ophelia grinned. “I know! Right?”

“What? What is it?” Arden asked. She started to turn her head.

“No, no. Don’t move,” Scarlet calmly warned her.

Arden froze. “What is it? Tell me, please.”

“Okay…there’s a…there’s a *butterfly* on your shoulder,” Scarlet said as gently as she knew how.

“What?”

“It’s very small.”

“How small?” asked Arden.

Scarlet held up her first finger and thumb two inches apart. “It’s kind of light gold,” she said, “with black outlines….There’s even some orange and a little blue.”

“It sounds kind of pretty,” said Arden.

“Oh, it is!” said Ophelia.

“I think…I don’t know….Should I look?”

“Yes!” said Scarlet and Ophelia together.

“But slowly,” said Scarlet. “Don’t scare it away.”

Slowly, very slowly, Arden swiveled her head to the right, until she could just barely see the butterfly out of the corner of her eye. Her heart must have been racing, Scarlet thought, if her own fluttering heart was any gauge. And Ophelia…Scarlet glanced at her and saw she was smiling at Arden. How excited she must be….

“How do you feel?” asked Ophelia gently.

“I feel okay….” Arden’s eyes left her shoulder for just an instant to flit from Ophelia to Scarlet. “And you know what’s even better? What I don’t feel is afraid!”

Scarlet was ready for the wish energy to flow out of Arden, but she wasn’t prepared for such an intense and powerful stream. It burst forth with such force that Scarlet staggered back, and Ophelia did, as well. Arden just stood there, oblivious, as Wishlings always were. She could only assume it was the butterfly they were reacting to, so she smiled and said, “Don’t worry. It won’t hurt you.”

Of course, that was the last thing Scarlet was worried about. The first thing was making sure every drop of energy made it into Ophelia’s Wish Pendant, which Ophelia seemed to have forgotten all about. Scarlet held her own hand out and pointed to her wrist to try to remind her, but Ophelia replied by shaking her head. That was when Scarlet realized the wish energy was already flowing into a Wish Pendant.

Not Ophelia’s at all—but Scarlet’s.

Epilogue

Scarlet was so happy about all the wish energy she had collected that she didn't even mind giving Ophelia a ride back home on her star. Scarlet hadn't planned on holding Ophelia's hand the whole time, but somehow it turned out that way, and they were still holding hands when Lady Stella's door opened to welcome the returning Starlings in.

Maybe that was why every jaw in the room seemed to drop. Or maybe it was Scarlet's smile, which she couldn't hold back and for once didn't even try to.

"Scarlet…" Lady Stella walked forward, her stardust-flecked silver robe flowing behind her in a shimmering diaphanous cloud. "I owe you star salutations and, more importantly, star apologies." She stood before Scarlet and humbly bowed. "Clearly, you always were—and always will be—meant to be a Star Darling. If there was any doubt whatsoever left, this resolves it once and for all."

With that, the headmistress extended her arm. In her upturned palm was the Wish Orb, which she handed to Scarlet. It felt heavy and warm and then began to transform into a flower. "It's a punkypow," said Scarlet with a smile. The burgundy star-shaped petals were aglow.

And then her Power Crystal, the ravenstone, emerged. It was so beautiful and made Scarlet feel very special, indeed. "Take it, and hold it dear," said Lady Stella.

"Oh, I will. I will," said Scarlet. Her own heart seemed to stop as she received the gem and felt the pulse of its energy through her hands.

Meanwhile, Lady Stella, still smiling, but more sadly, turned to Ophelia. As she spoke, she shook her head. “To you, Ophelia, I must also offer star apologies. It is clear you are not a Star Darling, as we had believed.”

Scarlet looked down. She remembered how those words had crushed her, and she could only imagine they’d wound Ophelia the same way. When Scarlet finally made herself look at the Starling, however, the words seemed instead to have lifted a great weight off Ophelia. Her whole aura had changed. Not only was she brighter and more sparkly, she looked almost happy—content and relieved. Her eyes skipped from Lady Stella to Scarlet, then around to each of the dumbstruck Star Darlings, who hadn’t moved since the two Starlings had glided in.

“*What the stars?* Who’s next?” Gemma suddenly blurted. “*Starf!* Hey!” she cried as Tessa elbowed her ribs.

Lady Stella clasped her now empty hands tightly in front of her, as if in prayer. “I know this is quite a lot for you to take in, particularly on such an…intensely emotional day. We’ve all been through quite a lot—especially, of course, Scarlet and Ophelia—which is why I think it’s best to retire for now. Rest assured that Lady Cordial and I will work diligently to ensure that nothing like this happens again.” She turned her head respectfully toward the admissions director, who’d stood off to the side in semi-shadow throughout the whole Wish Blossom presentation.

Lady Cordial took a step forward and bowed to the headmistress. Her deep purple bun looked especially tight. “We most c-c-certainly will,” she said, her eyes still on the floor. “No mis-s-stakes like this. Ever again.”



As fast as Scarlet had fled from the other Star Darlings when she’d learned she’d been dismissed from the group, she fled even faster now that she was back in. She could see everyone waiting to congratulate her and *embrace* her (*ugh!*) outside Lady Stella’s office, and suddenly, it all seemed too much for her to bear. She would deal with them all later—be sociable—Scarlet thought as she rushed past them, but right then, more than anything, she needed to be by herself. She’d already hugged and held hands more in one day than she had in the whole rest of her time at Starling Academy. She was overwhelmed. She needed to breathe.

The holo-text came as she was descending the spiral staircase into the Star Caves.

WHERE DID YOU GO? it flashed as Vega's picture appeared in the upper corner of the screen.

Scarlet almost didn't answer, but then another line came through…and another after that:

WE HAVE TO TALK!

YOU WERE RIGHT!

AND SO WAS CASSIE!

THE LAB RESULTS CAME IN WHILE YOU WERE GONE!

And…? Scarlet waited. *Well?* she thought. What had they found out?

Finally, she texted back:

WHAT DID THEY SAY?!

She realized she was holding her breath as she stared at her Star-Zap, waiting for Vega's reply. At last, the screen flashed again, this time with both Cassie's and Vega's faces, one in each corner. Cassie's picture coyly winked.

HERE'S A HINT: ISLE OF MISERA.

FOR MORE, MEET US IN THE HEDGE MAZE.

ASAP!

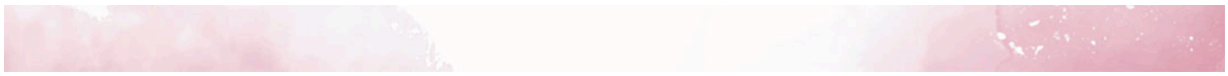
So as fast as possible, Scarlet spun and ran back up the stairs.

The Isle of Misera? That sad, barren, negative-energy dumping ground? Could it be that the Star Darlings' flowers had come from there?

Cassie Comes Through

Shana Muldoon Zappa and Ahmet Zappa
with Zelda Rose

Disney Press
Los Angeles • New York



Prologue

- You there, Vega?
- I’m here, Cassie. In the maze with Scarlet waiting for you!
- ???
- Didn’t you get my holo-text?
- That’s so weird. I didn’t get it. You know I hate that maze, anyway. Can we just talk now?
- Sure. I’ll add Scarlet.
- Hey, Cassie.
- Hey, Scarlet! Starkudos on your Wish Mission!
- Star salutations! It wasn’t easy, that’s for sure.
- So I just told Scarlet we found out that the flowers that were delivered to the Star Darlings are from the Isle of Misera!
- Crazy! No wonder everyone was fighting so much. But I thought that place was off-limits. Who do you think sent them? And why?
- That’s a very good question. And as a matter of fact, that’s not the only strange thing going on at Starling Academy…

- You mean the way I was kicked out of the group and replaced by Ophelia? And then had to go down to Wishworld to save her stars?
- Yes, plus I just finished Vega's crossword puzzle…
-  Star salutations! I'm impressed! So, what did you think?
- It's pretty starmazing!
- I had to make some changes and move some answers around to get it to line up so perfectly. I'm glad you enjoyed it!
- Um, yeah, it was a startastic layout…
- but I was talking about the actual content.
- 
- I mean, when I saw all those the clues together, it was eye-opening! 
- 
- Spit it out, Cassie!
- Think about it! Look at 3-Across, 7-Across, and sorry, your mission, too, Vega—everyone has had a problem identifying either her Wisher or the wish. And 10-Across: Leona's private band tryout invite got holo-blasted to the entire school and our top-secret name was revealed. Or how about 8-Down: Leona's Wish Pendant got ruined and she didn't collect any wish energy.
- Plus me, Ophelia, the flowers…
- 1) I l♥ve, l♥ve, l♥ve that my puzzle got you thinking, Cassie!
  2) Wow. I was only looking at them as puzzle clues. But

when you actually read them one after another, it's pretty crazy!

- Starzactly.
- There is a lot of weird stuff going on, that's for sure. And what about my and Ophelia's deliberately switched grades?
- Was that ever proven?
- Well, not yet, but…
- Listen, we need to stay calm. Do you think it could just be a coincidence?
- No way!
- Well…we've been brought together to do something so controversial it has to be kept secret from everyone else at Starling Academy—to collect wish energy on Wishworld before we graduate. I'm afraid that maybe we're being sanitized.
- ???
- Okay, now I'm really confused!
- Darn you, starcorrect! I meant sabotaged!
- That's terrible! But…by who?
- Okay, I don't know how to say this. I know you think I can be paranoid….
- Um, well, maybe because just yesterday you were convinced that someone stole your starglasses, and they were sitting on top of your head!
-  Okay, so maybe you have a point. But…
- Yes?
- Well, um, what if someone really is out to get us? What better way to do it…
- Waiting…
- …than from within? What if it is someone here at Starling Academy? Or even worse…
- What could be worse?

- What if it’s one of us…a Star Darling?
-  I hope you’re wrong…
- And if I’m not?
- Then there’s only one thing to say: Oh, starf.
- You said it, Starling.

CHAPTER 1

“Well, there you are, Itty!” Cassie cooed as her pet glowfur landed on her shoulder and nuzzled her pale cheek. Itty’s soft pink fur tickled Cassie’s face and made the tiny girl giggle. Cassie smiled at the little creature in the mirror as she finished twisting her long, glimmering pinkish-white hair into a second pigtail bun, fastened it in place with a starpin, and reached up to give the creature a quick tickle. Itty chirped delightedly and the stars on her golden antennae twinkled. The glowfur rewarded Cassie with the “Song of Contentment.” Cassie, who had heard it many times before, hummed along.

“That’s really pretty,” someone said. Cassie turned around to find her roommate smiling at her. Sage, freshly gleaming from her sparkle shower, was wrapped in a soft lavender towel that matched her hair and eyes.

Cassie nodded in agreement. “Can you believe that glowfurs have twenty-six distinct songs?” she asked. “And that each glowfur has her own version of each tune? This is one of my favorites. After the ‘Song of Joy’ and ‘Song of Enchantment,’ of course.”

“Yes, I can believe it,” said Sage. “Only because you’ve told me a moonium times!”

Although Cassie’s first impulse was to scowl at Sage, she just rolled her eyes and laughed instead. That was the key to having a pleasant relationship

with her roommate. Cassie was beginning to realize that Sage didn't mean to offend; she just liked to say whatever was on her mind.

Sage opened her closet door with her wish energy manipulation skills and quickly got dressed behind it. When she emerged, she was wearing a loosely woven shimmery sweater over a long sleeveless dress that flickered and changed color as she moved—exhibiting more shades of purple than Cassie knew existed. Cassie preferred to wear more delicate outfits, mostly in white and pale shades of silver and pink, but she appreciated the bold color of Sage's flowing, comfortable clothes. Sage shook her head in mock seriousness. "Actually, what I really can't believe is you still haven't gotten caught," she said with a laugh.

"That's because Itty and I are very careful," said Cassie, smoothing her silvery tunic with the ruffled hem. Itty took off from Cassie's shoulder and circled the room, still singing her song. Cassie smiled at Sage. "And because I have a very discreet roommate."

Sage nodded from the floor, where she crouched, buckling her sparkly sandals. "I *am* discreet, aren't I?"

"You are," said Cassie. She poured Itty's daily allotment of Green Globules into a crystal bowl and Itty zoomed over, her bright blue gossamer wings fluttering madly as they struggled to hold up the weight of her plump little body. She knocked over a pile of holo-books in her rush to enjoy her breakfast. Cassie had read the Starling Academy Student Manual from cover to cover and knew quite well that pets were expressly forbidden to live in the student dormitories. She told herself that she had taken Itty to school with her because the creature would have been lonely back at her uncle Andreas's mansion. He was away on book tours more often than he was at home. But the truth was that Cassie simply couldn't part with her pet, who had once belonged to Cassie's late mother. When Itty sang her evening song, Cassie was reminded that her mother had fallen asleep to the very same tune many staryears ago. It wasn't much, in the grand scheme of things, but it brought her great comfort. So Cassie had packed up Itty and her various glowfur paraphernalia and successfully smuggled her past the Bot-Bot guards on the first day of school.

But keeping Itty a secret from her roommate had not been easy. There had been that unpleasant moment when, to avoid suspicion, she had to eat a Green Globule after Sage's nosy little brothers had found a bag of them under her bed. Her face wrinkled up at the distasteful memory. And there

had been the time when Sage woke to Itty's singing and tried to convince Cassie that she and her "stellar voice" needed to join the starchoir. (Cassie's voice was actually quite mediocre, so she had feigned a sore throat, missing tryouts.) But it turned out that Sage had already guessed Cassie's secret and accepted her small and furry extra roommate. Cassie had had another stressful period during the time when she and Sage hadn't been getting along and she had grown nervous that her roommate might turn her in. But Sage had proved to be a loyal roommate, even when the two were bickering.

It was those flowers! thought Cassie, staring at the spot where the vase had sat, its coral blooms fragrant, enticing, and perpetually fresh and dewy. But Cassie had had a feeling that something was not quite right with them, and her hunches were often correct. There was suddenly a lot of tension in the room, and Cassie had realized that she could just not get along with her roommate. In a moment of impulse, she had grabbed the flowers and tossed them into the vanishing garbage can, and things had returned to normal between them. And then she had convinced Vega that they should bring *her* flowers to the botany lab. They had discovered that the flowers came from the Isle of Misera, a place off-limits to Starlings. But who had sent them? And why? That was still a mystery. Cassie made it her mission to destroy the rest of the flowers, but it wasn't easy. She had tried to explain to the rest of the Star Darlings that the flowers were having a bad effect on them, but everyone had just laughed. She had a theory that the longer someone kept the flowers, the more attached to them that person became, so she'd had to get creative. On her fingers, she ticked off the roommate pairs who no longer had flowers in their rooms. Vega and Piper's flowers were still sealed in the botany lab, awaiting more testing. She had tossed Gemma and Libby's when they were in the middle of a heated argument over who had forgotten to turn off the sparkle shower. She had only been able to convince Tessa to get rid of the flowers once she told her that their strong odor interfered with the delicious smells of her baking. And Leona and Ophelia's had simply disappeared. (She still hadn't figured that one out, but at least they were gone.) That left one roommate pair who still had the flowers in their room—Clover and Astra. Cassie needed to get right on that as soon as starpossible.

Sage finished buckling her sandals and walked to the door, her lavender braids gleaming.

“Ready to go to the Celestial Café?” she asked Cassie.

“Ready!” said Cassie. Itty zoomed in for a kiss on her furry head and began her good-bye song.

Cassie hurried to the door. “Oh, let me,” she begged, so Sage stepped aside. Cassie concentrated on opening the door with her wish energy manipulation skills and the door began to tremble, almost imperceptibly, as if it was trying to decide whether it wanted to be opened or stay closed. A starmin or two later, after Cassie’s pale face flushed silver from the effort, the door slid open fluidly.

Cassie grinned and turned to Sage. “You’re like my good-luck charm, Sage,” she said. “I wish I was as good in Wish Energy Manipulation class as I am in our room.” She shrugged. “I guess I get stage fright or something.”

Sage nodded and for a starsec Cassie thought she caught a small flicker of a smile on her roommate’s face. But it disappeared as they stepped into the hallway and onto the Cosmic Transporter.

Cassie’s stomach grumbled. “I wonder what to order for break—” she started.

“Stop right there!” a voice barked.

Cassie sighed. They were moving along on the Cosmic Transporter and couldn’t stop even if they wanted to, for stars’ sake. But Sage laughed merrily. “Hurry up, MO-Jay!” she cried.

The Bot-Bot guide zoomed after them eagerly. His official name was MO-J4, but Sage thought that was a little too formal and had settled on the nickname, which he had embraced wholeheartedly. MO-Jay had taken an instant starshine to Sage during her orientation tour and had been delighted by anything Sage did or said ever since. Most Bot-Bots acted by the holo-book with a preset vocabulary and a limited range of programmed reactions. But MO-Jay was special. He had a personality that was silly and fun, and he often greeted Sage with special jokes and an occasional gift left on her doorstep.

Cassie couldn’t help feeling a little envious as MO-Jay excitedly told Sage about the morning’s sunrise and showed her a holo-vid he had taken of it just for her. Sometimes Cassie wished that she and Itty could talk, like Sage and MO-Jay did. Though she wasn’t quite sure what Itty would say. Most likely “More Green Globules, please.” Or maybe “Rub my glowbelly for another starhour if you don’t mind.” The only present Itty had ever

given her (besides the gift of music) was a half-eaten Green Globule, left in the toe of a silver slipper. And by the time Cassie had found it, it was as hard as a meteorite. Cassie had tossed it into the vanishing garbage can. She knew exactly what Green Globules tasted like, even at the peak of freshness: horrible.

Still, she wouldn't trade Itty for all the wish energy in Starland. She half listened to Sage and Mojo chat away. She smiled, remembering that Sage had initially confided to her that she found MO-J4's slavish devotion a bit annoying. But then the silvery Bot-Bot had started to grow on her. Sage told Cassie she was used to small annoying creatures, referring to her younger twin brothers, who could be quite a handful. As an only child, and an orphaned one at that, Cassie had nodded in apparent sympathy. But Cassie would actually have liked nothing more than an annoying sibling (or two or even three) to liven things up around her uncle's quiet home. That was why she liked Starling Academy so much, she realized. It was lively and there was always something going on to keep her entertained. Like that time when Astra had bet everyone that she could do a triple flip off the starbounce while eating a half-moon pie. It looked like she was going to win the wager when Leona had jumped up and—

Just then she realized that Sage was trying to get her attention. "Cassie!" she was saying, snapping her fingers in Cassie's face. Cassie blinked. "We haven't even discussed the new Scarlet situation yet!" she said. "I mean, that was so unexpected. So what do you think about her reinsta—"

Cassie held up her hand. She turned to MO-J4. "I'm going to remind you that everything you hear is strictly confidential," she told the Bot-Bot. Even though he was extremely devoted to Sage, the Star Darlings couldn't risk anyone's—or anybot's—leaking information about their secret mission.

MO-J4's eyes flashed as if he was annoyed, or perhaps disappointed, by the request, but he politely nodded. "Certainly, Cassie," he said smoothly.

Sage nodded solemnly. "So what do you think about Scarlet's reinstatement?" she asked. "It's just so strange."

Cassie frowned and bit her lip. She adored her roommate and completely trusted her, but still…She and Scarlet had promised Vega that until they had some more evidence they would keep to themselves their fears about what they thought was going on. No need to throw everyone else into a tizzy if there was a reasonable explanation for everything, Vega had argued. Cassie and Scarlet had reluctantly agreed.

“Well, it was certainly a sur—” she finally started.

“I think it’s simply wonderful!” MO-J4 exclaimed. “Now the group can get back together and you can win the Battle of the Bands on Starshine Day. Beat that Vivica, just like she deserves!”

“All right, see you later, MO-Jay,” she said. They had reached the Celestial Café. The light was shining above the door. Breakfast was ready to be served and another day was about to unfold.

Sage smiled at Cassie. “And our starday begins,” she said. “Hope it’s a good one.”

Cassie tapped her elbows together three times for luck. She herself was hoping for a day filled with more clues. Something strange was going on at Starling Academy; she was almost sure of it. She just needed some tangible proof.

CHAPTER 2

"How many times do I have to tell you?" Clover scolded her roommate. "No star balls at the breakfast table!" She rolled her eyes, turning to the rest of the Star Darlings sitting around the table as if she was an exasperated teacher and Astra a naughty Wee Constellation School student. "She throws that thing around all day long. It never stops. It's driving me crazy! I wake up in the middle of the night and there she is, tossing that ball!"

"I told you, Coach Geeta said we have to practice as much as we can to prepare for the big game," retorted Astra, her flaming red hair pulled into two braids. Two matching glittery spots appeared on her cheeks. Cassie knew Astra well enough to know that meant she was getting angry.

"I'm sure she didn't mean in the Celestial Café!" Clover practically shouted. The rest of the Star Darlings looked at each other uncomfortably. The usually fun-loving Clover was being very rigid, and Astra was being way more stubborn than usual. It wasn't enjoyable to watch the two butt heads so forcefully. Cassie held her breath as Astra grinned wickedly and tossed the shining orb into the air again, her hands poised to catch it. She made the ball hover in the air over the table for a moment, showing off the skills that made her Starling Academy's most talented star ball player. Just then a Bot-Bot waiter zoomed in with a breakfast tray.

“Yum!” said Astra, distracted for a moment. “Am I hungry! I had quite a workout this morning!” And Cassie watched in shock as the shining orb crashed down, faster than she thought possible. “Oh, my stars!” said the Bot-Bot in dismay as it hit his tray with a loud smack, sending stacks of steaming starcakes and glasses of glorange juice flying onto the table.

The girls stared at the scattered starcakes and the puddles of glowing glorange juice on the fancy tablecloth. Tessa, who hated to see any food go to waste, quickly snatched up a starcake and took a bite out of one of its perfect five points. Clover looked furious. The rest of the girls exchanged glances. They knew Clover was overreacting, since the mess immediately disappeared, as messes always did on Starland. “Pardon me,” said the Bot-Bot apologetically as he neatly stacked the plates and zoomed back to the kitchen for a replacement breakfast tray. Cassie nudged Vega’s leg under the table. But the girl didn’t react. Cassie did it again.

“Did you just kick me?” Astra scowled across the table at Clover.

Oops, thought Cassie.

“No, I didn’t!” Clover retorted. “But maybe I should!”

The two girls glared at each other. Cassie noticed that although both their mouths were set in grim lines, there were matching looks of confusion in their eyes. It was as if they couldn’t understand why they were so angry at each other, and they weren’t very happy about it, either.

That’s it, thought Cassie. If there had been any question in her mind about the negative effect of the vases of flowers, it had just been answered. Everyone else was getting along well (with the exception of Leona and Scarlet, who would probably never get along under any circumstances, but that was another story). She, Vega, and Scarlet had to come up with a plan to dispose of the flowers—that starday.

The rest of breakfast went by without incident, and Cassie leapt up from the table as soon as she took her last bite of astromuffin. She hurried out of the cafeteria, excited to get to her first class of the day—Intro to Wish Identification. Never slowing her pace, she hopped onto the Cosmic Transporter that looped through campus, and she jumped off at Halo Hall. She bounded up the steps and through the large imposing doors, which dwarfed her tiny figure. Although Cassie’s secret Star Darlings lessons had placed her far beyond the rest of the first-year class, and she often found boring the introductory lessons she had to attend to keep up her cover, she was really looking forward to that day’s class. They were going to attempt

wish identification on a Starlandian creature. Cassie tapped her elbows together three times for luck, hoping they'd be studying a glion or a galliope, or maybe even a twinkelope. She would love to hear its trumpeting call in person. Being up close with any one of those majestic creatures would really be a thrill, as would trying to figure out what its wish could possibly be. She quickened her pace down the starmarble hallway, toward the wish stellation. She didn't want to be late.

"Cassie, wait up!"

Now what? thought Cassie as she abruptly stopped, the soles of her silvery ankle boots squeaking on the floor. She turned around impatiently. But her scowl disappeared. To her starprise, it was Leona pushing through the crowd of students to get to her side. *Imagine that.*

"I need to catch my breath!" Leona gasped, putting her sparkly golden hand to her sparkly golden throat. "You practically ran right out of the Celestial Café. I've been chasing you ever since!"

"You look really glowful," said Cassie appreciatively, taking in the girl's aura. Leona had been looking decidedly unglimmery ever since her failed mission. That had concerned all the Star Darlings, since Leona was naturally extra golden to begin with.

"Star salutations," said Leona, holding out a sparkly arm and admiring it. "I'm starting to feel a bit better."

"I'm glad," said Cassie, and she really meant it. It felt good to be talking to Leona. Sure, they had been in Star Darlings class together and seated at the Star Darlings' table at the dining hall, but this was the first time they were talking one-on-one since their argument about Ophelia.

That she and Leona, so different at first glance—very nearly opposites, in fact—had become such fast friends had starprised her. Cassie had initially felt intimidated by the bold, brash third year, never in a moonium staryears dreaming that the two would have anything in common—or that she would actually enjoy spending time with a girl who seemed always on the lookout for an admiring audience. Cassie had assumed that Leona would be exhausting to be around, but the truth was that Leona's zest for life energized and inspired her. And she learned that Leona had a kind and generous side that was easy to overlook at first glance.

Their unlikely friendship had begun one evening on the way back from dinner shortly after school had started. The Star Darlings were on the Cosmic Transporter heading back to their dormitories. Cassie recalled that

Leona was singing a song about the beauty of lightfall, her arms thrown out and her eyes closed. Cassie thought that the girl looked more luminous than anyone else, her golden hair a brilliant halo around her radiant face. She was shocked when Leona had impulsively grabbed her hand at the end of the song. “We’re going to the roof,” Leona had announced, and before Cassie could argue, she had whisked her into the upperclassman dormitory and up onto the roof deck. Cassie, who had thought she preferred always being in the background, was surprised to discover she enjoyed being in the golden spotlight of Leona’s attention. The two girls had lain on lounge chairs well into the night, staring at the magnificently star-studded sky, squealing when they spotted a shooting star. They pointed out constellations to each other, and when they ran out of names, they made some up. Leona told Cassie all about her family, about how she loved them fiercely but sometimes felt held back by their limited view of the world. And Leona had been the first person at Starling Academy who Cassie had told about her parents, tentatively pointing out their stars, which winked at her as they always did. Leona had known that no words were required at that moment, just a warm hand to hold as they sat in silence and stared into the heavens. The two didn’t realize how late it was until they saw how the stars had completely shifted across the sky. Cassie had had to sneak back into her dorm long after lights-out. In fact, she had felt a little thrill of naughtiness when she’d placed her hand on her room’s palm scanner and the Bot-Bot voice had said, “Good evening, Cassie,” in what she was certain was a disapproving tone.

But her friendship with Leona had practically ground to a halt after the Starling’s disastrous mission. While Cassie understood how disappointed Leona was when it was discovered that she had not collected any wish energy, she was surprised when Leona had completely shut down and frozen her out. Instead Leona had chosen to spend time with her new roommate, and Scarlet’s replacement as a Star Darling, Ophelia. And once Cassie had started asking questions about Ophelia—who, everyone agreed, didn’t seem to be Star Darlings material at all—Leona had taken great offense. They had pretty much avoided being alone together ever since.

Sure, Cassie felt a slight glimmer of resentment that Leona had dropped her friendship so abruptly, but her delight in seeing her friend looking so much better won out. Leona gave her a blinding megawatt smile and Cassie

grinned right back. All right, maybe Leona's smile wasn't *quite* as intense as it had been before all her mission troubles, but it was still pretty dazzling.

Leona slipped her arm through Cassie's. She leaned down as if to tell Cassie a secret. "So can you believe it?" she whispered, her breath tickling Cassie's ear. "You know they moved Ophelia into the Little Dipper Dormitory. Not only did I lose the sweetest roommate ever, but I'm sharing a room with weird old Scarlet again."

"Poor you," said Cassie, feeling a stab of guilt. She was fond of Scarlet —or as fond as anyone could be of the secretive and somewhat strange girl. But her pleasure at being back in Leona's good graces outweighed her loyalty to Scarlet.

"All that black!" Leona groaned. "And the constant skateboarding messing up my beauty sleep. And remember, she plays the *drums* and she always forgets to turn on the muting switch. And her weird stuff lying around. Globerbeem cases and old meepletile skins. Ugh." She shuddered with distaste. "Imagine what new oddities she's collected since I've seen her last." She sighed and made a sad face. "And what's going to happen to Ophelia? She may not be a Star Darling, but she's such a sweet Starling." She gave Cassie a sidelong glance and her eyes widened. "You know something? She's an orphan, too! But she has no one at all, not like you with your famous uncle to take care of you. As a matter of fact, she grew up in an orphanage in Starland City. She hadn't made any friends in Starling Academy until she met me. And now she's all alone again."

"Oh," said Cassie. She hadn't known that about Ophelia. She had been so focused on the wrongness of Ophelia's being a Star Darling that it hadn't occurred to her to think about the girl's feelings. Now all Cassie felt was sympathy for her. No one but a fellow orphan could understand the unspeakable pain of losing both of your parents at a young age. Of feeling so achingly alone, like you belonged to no one, adrift in a world that was suddenly empty and terribly frightening. And the devastating realization that life would never, ever be the same. For a girl who was searching for a place to fit in, being offered the chance to be a part of a secret group and then having it suddenly taken away must have been devastating.

Cassie swallowed hard. "I…I…I'll keep an eye out for her," she heard herself say.

"And you'll talk to her, see how she's doing?" Leona pressed.

Cassie nodded. "I will. Cross my stars and hope to shine."

“Star salutations,” said Leona. “I’m worried about her. I really am.”

Cassie nodded. “Well, here’s my classroom,” she said. She unlinked her arm from Leona’s and impulsively gave her a quick hug. She tried to step back, but Leona held on for a moment longer than Cassie was expecting.

Leona had missed her. And that was a pretty nice thing to realize.

CHAPTER 3

When Cassie stepped inside, she saw that her classmates were clustered together in the front of the room. *Professor Lucretia Delphinus is either teaching the class how to shoot holo-dice or the Starlandian creature's already here,* she thought with a grin. But she had no one to share her little joke with. Cassie had a well-deserved reputation as a quiet girl who liked her privacy and never spoke out of turn, and her classmates respected this and tended to leave her alone.

She was okay with that. *Still,* she thought as she stood uncertainly at the front of the class, *it would be nice if someone would turn around and say hello or move over to make room for me in the circle.* But she wasn't surprised that no one did. What was disappointing to her was that she knew her fellow classmates (and sometimes professors, as well) often took her reserved nature for aloofness or, worse yet, thought she had nothing to contribute. She did have a lot to offer; it was just that she liked to get all her thoughts in order before she opened her mouth. She didn't like idle chitchat, throwaway comments, or speaking for the sole purpose of hearing herself talk. She couldn't fathom being like Gemma, who could make small talk with anyone—teachers, students, parents, staff, strangers. Gemma was quite well liked because of it. But Cassie found the girl's constant chatter simply exhausting.

The one place Cassie truly felt at ease was among her fellow Star Darlings. They seemed to appreciate her thoughtful, deliberate responses and had learned never to rush her to speak her mind before she was ready. She felt as if she had found her place. That's why all the strange things that were going on were making her feel extra nervous. How she hoped it wasn't a fellow Star Darling who was responsible. *That is,* if *anything is going on*, she reminded herself, hearing Vega's voice of reason in her head. There could be a logical explanation for everything, couldn't there?

The crowd of students hadn't shifted an inch. Cassie stood on her toes to try to peer over them, but as she expected, it was useless. She overheard snippets of conversation: "How startastic!" and "I can't wait to guess what the wish is!" She bit her lip in anticipation.

"Okay, class, time to get started," Professor Lucretia Delphinus called out. "Everyone to your seats."

The girls reluctantly scattered and Cassie headed to her desk. She plopped down into the chair, which immediately adjusted to her height, build, and preferred seating position, the ultimate in classroom comfort. Vega had told her that the seats in Wishworld classrooms were hard and rigid. That didn't make sense to Cassie at all. She couldn't imagine how you could pay attention to your lessons when you were uncomfortable.

Now that the students were all seated, Cassie was frustrated when she realized that she still couldn't see the creature. Her professor, a tiny woman in a voluminous swirly purple-and-blue skirt that looked like a moonstorm, was somehow positioned in a way that precisely blocked her view. She craned her neck, but she was unable to see behind the woman.

"Star greetings, students," said Professor Lucretia Delphinus. "Welcome to your first wish identification workshop. Today we will be granting the wishes of our special guest, Mica." She stepped to the side and Cassie finally caught a glimpse. The creature was sitting in the middle of the teacher's desk, staring into space. Cassie felt her spirits drop. It wasn't a majestic glion who could be wishing to climb to the top of the Crystal Mountains and graze on the rainbow lichen that grew there or a galliope who might want to take a lucky student for a ride on his broad back, her fingers laced through his glittering mane. She would not be hearing the bellowing call of the many-antlered twinkelope anytime soon. No, that day they would be guessing the wishes of a much smaller and decidedly less

glamorous creature—a creature Cassie knew almost as well as she knew herself: a glowfur.

Cassie shook her head and laughed to herself. This wasn't going to be challenging at all. She sighed and waited for the class to begin.

The professor continued. "We'll be honing our wish identification skills as we try to determine exactly what Mica is wishing for this morning." She clasped her hands together and smiled at the students. "I'll start with an easy question. Who can tell me what type of creature Mica is?"

Hands shot into the air. Cassie kept hers down. Too easy.

"Gloryah?" said the professor, pointing to a student with a pinkish-orange glow. Cassie liked her; she had a sweet disposition and was exceedingly polite, a trait Cassie admired greatly.

"A moonbug!" said Gloryah. But her brow wrinkled as the words came out of her mouth. "No, that's not right. I mean a—"

"It's a glowfur," interjected a student named Aerabelle disdainfully. She snorted. "Even my baby sister knows the difference between a glowfur and a moonbug!"

"I knew that!" Gloryah said. She looked around the room, appealing to her classmates. "I really did!"

Cassie gave Gloryah an understanding smile (though, really, who could mix those two up?) and turned to bestow a frown on Aerabelle, who had dusky purple curls and a deceptively sweet round face. You were not supposed to react negatively to your classmates; that was one of Starling Academy's basic rules. Being kind and supportive—no matter how silly you thought a comment or question was—helped create an atmosphere of civility and support, which encouraged sharing and open dialogue, per the Student Manual. Aerabelle had apparently skipped that chapter.

"Be kind, Aerabelle," the professor said in a warning voice. She might have been tiny, but her toughness was legendary. Her eyes flashed with annoyance. "That's what we are here for. To learn, of course, but to do so in a supportive way. There are no incorrect answers. We learn from everything that is shared in this classroom, accurate or inaccurate. There is no room for negativity here."

Aerabelle pouted, clearly not comprehending her teacher's words, just her scolding tone. Cassie wasn't surprised. The purple-haired girl was part of a group of first years whose ringleader was a student named Vivica, who had been particularly rude to the Star Darlings from day one at Starling

Academy. Aerabelle was just as kind and understanding as her pale blue friend, Vivica—which is to say not at all.

Cassie watched as Gloryah's face burned brightly with embarrassment. Cassie felt sorry for the girl but was quick to notice that she flushed a very pretty shade. Whenever Cassie blushed, her cheeks turned a silvery shade that she thought was very unflattering.

Professor Lucretia Delphinus pointed to the glowfur, who gazed at the class serenely. "Class, please say hello to Mica," the professor instructed.

"Star greetings, Mica," said the class, and Mica rewarded them with a few notes from the "Song of Meeting New People." His singing was very pretty, though slightly muffled thanks to his bulging cheeks, stuffed with Green Globules. Cassie smiled. Glowfurs were notoriously greedy. The golden star on Mica's belly glowed in greeting.

The students all oohed and aahed, as you would do if you didn't have a pet glowfur who lived in your room and glowed its starbelly at you every morning. The creature blinked its large eyes at the students. A sigh went up.

"She's so cute!" Aerabelle cried.

"Actually, she's a he," corrected Cassie gently. But really, how could the girl not see that his belly star was half the size of a female's, the surest indicator?

"Whatever," said Aerabelle with a shrug.

Cassie shook her head. Some Starlings!

"So what is this glowfur wishing for?" the professor asked the class. "Concentrate and pay attention to the signals. This will be the most challenging part of your Wish Missions. Wishlings make many wishes, sometimes several a day. The key is to deduce their special wish."

The students all stared at the glowfur, who looked right back at them, his large eyes serious, his little paws buried in the fur on top of his head. *So that's it!* thought Cassie. His wish was suddenly so apparent to her it was like it was stamped on the middle of his furry little forehead. She felt a rush of positive energy flow through her. *Piece of pie,* she thought, using a Wishworld expression her roommate had taught her. She looked around, waiting for someone to pick up on the obvious clue.

"He's hungry!" called out a girl named Tansy.

"Yes, that's it. Mica wants his breakfast!" a blue-tinged classmate chimed in.

“That’s not it,” said the professor. “Try again. When you figure it out, you may feel a burst of energy. But unfortunately, that doesn’t happen for everyone.”

Cassie yawned. With a quick glance to make sure that her professor’s attention was focused elsewhere, she slipped her Star-Zap into her lap and flipped it open. She began composing a holo-text message to Vega and Scarlet.


Do either of you have early lunch? We could meet up.


Second lunch.



No, last lunch. And I’m already hungry!


Then meet after SD class? What a mess in the caf this morning, huh?


That was crazy! Sounds good.


Okay with me.


We have to figure out how to get our hands on those flowers! Any ideas?


Vega?


Scarlet?



You two there?



Hello?

Still no response. Cassie tried to keep an eye on her screen as well as on her teacher. She stole a glance at Mica, whose pink fur was now standing up on his head in his obvious irritation. She was about to raise her hand to reveal the wish and help put the glowfur out of his misery when her Star-Zap began to vibrate and beep loudly. She scrambled to silence it and dropped her Star-Zap on the floor. It landed with a loud clatter and slid to the middle of the classroom, out of her reach.

Starf! She thought she had put it in silent mode.

Her classmates stared at her, openmouthed. The room was so still you could have heard a glowfur gasp. With as much dignity as she could muster, she walked over to pick up her Star-Zap. The tiny professor glided over and held out her hand. Shamefaced, Cassie placed the Star-Zap in her palm.

"Star apologies," muttered Cassie. For a girl who hated to call attention to herself, this was an extraordinarily mortifying moment. She stood in front of her teacher, unsure what to do next.

"Outside," the professor said sternly, turning and heading toward the classroom door, which opened smoothly. As Cassie followed the teacher out of the room, she was well aware that all eyes, including Mica's, were on her.

To Cassie's dismay, the professor began to lecture her in front of the open doorway, in view of the entire class, which seemed to be hanging on every word. "Now, Cassie, I am very disappointed in you," the professor said sternly. "You know that there is no holo-texting allowed in the classroom. Your behavior was disrespectful and inexcusable."

Cassie shut her eyes. This was her worst nightmare. More than once she had dreamed of being humiliated in front of her class. And it was even more distressing and embarrassing than she had imagined it would be. *What is going to happen to me?* she wondered. *Will she keep my Star-Zap to teach me a lesson? Give me an extra holo-report assignment on wish identification? Or could it be something worse?* She had heard rumors of a

double secret detention room for badly misbehaving students that featured uncomfortable chairs and a special light that masked everyone's glow, leaving them looking like dull Wishlings. She was sure it was a star legend that upperclassmen told to scare unsuspecting first years, but she certainly didn't want to find out.

She braced herself for the punishment that was no doubt to come. The classroom door slid shut behind her silently and ominously.

Cassie gulped.

CHAPTER 4

“How was that?” said the professor.

Cassie was confused. “Star-starscuse me?” she stammered. She looked up to see her that her teacher was grinning down at her.

“I was just putting on a show for the rest of the students,” Professor Lucretia Delphinus explained, handing Cassie her Star-Zap. “You know, make them think I was really annoyed with you. I didn’t want to blow your cover.” She put a hand on Cassie’s shoulder. “Pretty convincing, huh?”

Cassie nodded. She was still so tense she was unable to speak. Professor Lucretia Delphinus had been convincing, all right!

“Look, I realize how boring these introductory classes can be for you when your studies have already taken you so much further,” the professor continued.

Cassie nodded again. Relief flowed over her and she was finally able to give the teacher a shaky smile.

“For the rest of these girls,” Professor Lucretia Delphinus explained, “wish identification is something that will happen staryears from now. For you, it could happen any starmin.”

Cassie felt her stomach give a little flip of anxiety. Professor Lucretia Delphinus’s words brought her both extreme excitement and crippling terror. Each time another Star Darling was chosen to go on a mission, she

could see the looks of disappointment on the other girls' faces and realized they did not experience the same overwhelming feeling of relief that swept through her.

Professor Lucretia Delphinus raised a finger as an idea came to her. "I know! I'm going to go inside and tell the rest of the class that I sent you to Lady Stella's office for a chat. That will keep them on their toes!" She laughed a conspiratorial laugh as she smoothed her skirt. "Why don't you go to the Illumination Library and relax until your next class?" She paused for a moment as if she was considering whether to say something else. "Cassie, maybe you could spend some time mulling over what's been bothering you."

Cassie looked at the teacher quizzically.

"You look like you have the weight of Starling Academy on your shoulders," the teacher explained. She looked deep into Cassie's eyes. "Is there anything you want to talk about?"

Cassie felt her chest expand for a moment when she thought of the possibility of having an adult ally. A grown-up to trust? An authority figure to share her worries with? It was like being presented with an unexpected but extremely valuable gift. But she couldn't get rid of the feeling that she just shouldn't trust anyone. She shook her head. "Actually, everything's fine," she fibbed. "I'm just worried about my Wish History assignment. Star salutations for understanding what happened in class. I'm really sorry."

The teacher nodded. "Now I'd better get back inside and help poor Mica," she said. "Of course, as you probably already figured out, he's wishing…"

"For a mirror so he can begin his daily grooming," finished Cassie. She could tell by the irritated way he had been preening his whiskers.

Her teacher smiled. "That he is, the vain little thing!"



The thought of having forty starmins to herself before her next class put a little bounce in Cassie's step. She walked down the hall, her footfalls echoing, as she considered her options. She could go to the Lightning Lounge and clear her mind in a meditation room and possibly come up with a clever idea for disposing of Astra and Clover's flowers. Since those two had had their flowers the longest, she thought that they could certainly put

up a fight to keep them. She might have to do some fancy footwork. Or she could steal some time for herself and finish the last chapter of the holo-book she was reading. It was her uncle's latest thriller, which would definitely relax her. (It wasn't even available to the public yet, but she was certain it would be another runaway best seller.) She was pretty sure she had the mystery all figured out, but Uncle Andreas often threw a few misleading clues (also known as drifting moonbugs) into his stories, so she was really interested to find out if her hunch was correct. Not wanting to waste any of her free time, she sat on a nearby starmarble bench and pulled out her holo-book.

The words leapt into the air and she began to read eagerly. Her uncle's books used IMT, the new Illuminated Manuscript Technology: anytime the reader wanted to see the action unfold, she just needed to push a button and the animated holo-scene would play, with the text read aloud as it happened. It was a thrilling way to experience a story, especially a mystery. She got to a particularly exciting passage and pressed the IMT button.

She held her breath as Detective Marmaduke Carbuncle stepped out of the shadowy recesses of a dark alley in Starland City. "Hold it right there, NT-96," he called.

"I…um…This does not compute!" Bot-Bot NT-96 barked. And suddenly it began to go berserk, ramming its metal body against the wall, sparks flying. Detective Carbuncle dove for cover as the Bot-Bot burst into —

"Um, starscuse me?" someone said meekly.

Cassie turned the book off with an irritated swipe. She turned to the figure that stood in front of her. "Yes?" she said through gritted teeth. There was nothing Cassie hated as much as being interrupted when she was reading.

"Um, hi, Cassie. Sorry for bothering you."

Cassie blinked. It was Ophelia. Her bright yellow hair hung on either side of her face in two pigtails. She wore a plain yellow T-shirt and a pair of overalls, which were a little short, so her yellow-and-white-striped socks peeked out. She was so tiny and frail that she made Cassie feel tall, an unfamiliar sensation for her. When she gazed down at the girl, she realized the height difference made her feel motherly and protective.

"Oh, hi," Cassie replied. "I was just talking about you with Leona."

The girl's wide ochre eyes filled with liquid-glitter tears. "Oh, Leona," she said. "I miss her so much. She was a wonderful roommate."

"Really?" said Cassie, who imagined that sharing a room with Leona would involve a large amount of appreciative observation. And applause.

"Oh, yes," she breathed. "She was so entertaining! Always putting on such fun shows. It was like going to the theater! Every day!"

"So where are you living now?" Cassie asked.

"I have a single room in the Little Dipper Dorm," said Ophelia sadly. "It's pretty lonely. I really miss Leona and also being a…" She looked around, saw that the hallway was deserted, and lowered her voice anyway. "A Star Darling."

Cassie nodded.

Ophelia leaned her head to one side, thinking. "I know I had some trouble fitting in. And my Wish Mission was a disaster, of course. But I really tried. Because I…I liked it. I finally felt like I belonged somewhere. Now I just feel kind of lost."

Cassie understood completely. "It was nice to belong to something special," she said. "Now you're just another Starling Academy student."

"That's right," said Ophelia. "That's exactly right."

"I understand you more than you know," said Cassie. She was starting to feel even more protective toward the girl. "I don't tell a lot of people about this, but I'm an orphan, too."

Ophelia gulped and looked away. "I'm sorry," she said. She let her eyes wander around the hallway, unable make eye contact with Cassie for a moment.

Cassie was touched. "Girls like us, we need to stick together," she said. She was overwhelmed with an unfamiliar desire to hug Ophelia and make her feel better. Let her know that she wasn't alone. She felt ashamed for the unkind thoughts she had had about the girl before.

"It's just so…hard here," said Ophelia.

Cassie nodded. "It *is* hard," she said. "It's so big and there's so much to learn and so many new people. It's difficult to be away from home…." Her voice trailed off as she realized her slip. How thoughtless of her! Ophelia didn't have a home; what had she been thinking?

But Ophelia leaned forward eagerly. "I know!" she said. "My mom says…"

Cassie looked at the girl in sympathy. “I used to do the same thing right after my parents began their afterglow,” she said. “It’s hard to talk about someone you love so much in the past tense, since they’re still so present for you.”

“What?” said Ophelia. Her eyes widened and she shifted in place. “Oh, yeah,” she said. “What I meant was that my mom *used* to tell me that you need to find a group of friends who make you sparkle. And I thought I found it with you Starlings.”

“Just because you’re not an official Star Darling, it doesn’t mean we can’t help to make you sparkle,” Cassie told the girl gently.

Ophelia’s face lit up. “Star salutations, Cassie,” she said.

The bell rang and girls began to swarm out of their classrooms. Ophelia was jostled a bit. “I’ll holo-text you later,” said Cassie as she turned to head down the hallway toward her next class. “I’ll see you again soon. Cross my stars and hope to shine,” she promised.

Ophelia smiled wanly. “I’d like that,” she said softly. She then turned and merged into the current of students, her small yellow-pigtailed head disappearing almost immediately.

Cassie stared after her, a smile on her face. All Ophelia needed was some friends, poor thing. She started toward the science stellation for her next class, then stopped in her tracks.

“Watch it!” said a blue-haired girl. “First year!” she remarked to a friend.

A sudden thought crossed Cassie’s mind. She knew why *she* was roaming the hallways during first period. But why hadn’t Ophelia been in class?

CHAPTER 5

"I'm sorry," said Vega. "I never got your holo-text. Scarlet and I have band practice right now, anyway. We can't go with you."

Cassie smiled at Scarlet. Despite her disappointment, she was glad to hear that the girl was back in the band.

Most of the Star Darlings were standing in the Star Quad, the area in the middle of campus. Their secret S.D. lessons, the last class of the day, had just let out. The girls usually chatted outside a bit before they headed off to their respective clubs, sports, lessons, studies, and other leisure activities before dinnertime.

"What time will it be over?" Cassie asked. "Maybe we could do it afterwards?" She really didn't feel confident confronting the two roommates by herself.

"No, then I'm meeting Professor Elara Ursa to talk about an extra-credit assignment," Vega explained.

Cassie wanted to ask if that couldn't wait until the next starday, but she saw the determined look in Vega's eyes. She knew that Vega's dream was to be the top student at Starling Academy and that she would do whatever it took to get there. She turned to Scarlet.

"And I have an Intuition study group," offered Scarlet. "I've really got to go since I missed all those classes. Star apologies."

“So I have to go get the flowers alone?” Cassie asked.

“Can’t it wait till tomorrow?” asked Vega.

Cassie glanced at Astra and Clover, who were arguing again. She gasped as Astra snatched the hat off Clover’s head and tossed it into the air, levitating it with wish energy in a cruel game of keep-away.

“I guess you’re right,” said Vega. “The sooner, the better.”

“And this is the only afternoon Astra has off from practice this week,” Cassie explained. “I overheard her saying she was going back to her room to watch old holo-vids of the team they are playing on Bopday.”

Vega considered this. “You’ll have to convince only her,” she said. “Clover will be at band practice with us.”

“That’s a plus,” said Cassie, her mood lightening a bit.

“So what’s your plan?” Scarlet asked.

“Oh, look!” shouted someone. Cassie turned around and gasped. The nimble Clover had scrambled up the trunk of a nearby ballum-blossom tree and now stood on a sturdy branch, her arms held out to the sides. She didn’t hesitate for even a moment before walking its length like a tightrope. Clover paused for a starsec, then leapt off, plucking the hat out of the air. She landed neatly, not a hair out of place. With a smirk at Astra, who looked like she was fuming, Clover jauntily placed the hat on her head and gave a deep bow. The rest of the Star Darlings applauded.

Vega shook her head. “I keep forgetting that she’s one of the Flying Molensas,” she said, referring to the most well-known circus family on Starland. “That girl is a born acrobat!”

“Impressive,” Cassie said, turning back to Vega and Scarlet.

“So, your plan?” Vega prompted her.

“Right,” said Cassie. “My plan is…” She sighed. “Actually, my plan is to come up with a plan on my way to their room.”

Scarlet snorted.

Vega sucked in her cheeks. “Not much of a plan,” she said.

“You’re telling me,” Cassie replied.

“Well, good luck with that!” Vega said, grimacing. “If it doesn’t happen, we can always try again tomorrow.”

Scarlet nodded. “I’m free.”

“Star salutations,” replied Cassie. She was determined to put an end to the nonsense that day.

She watched as the two girls headed to the Lightning Lounge with Sage, Leona, and Libby. That was good. Sure, Scarlet was straggling behind, keeping apart from everyone, but she was getting back into the swing of things and that was what mattered.

Cassie turned around, looking for Astra, but she had already left. Cassie hopped on the Cosmic Transporter, hoping that the girl had gone straight back to her room. The flower business needed to end that day. She had a bigger dish to dry. She grinned as she recalled another Wishling expression one of the Star Darlings had shared with her. *I'm going to knock their clocks off when it's my turn to go down to Wishworld,* she thought. Her words were brave but her stomach flipped at the very thought.



Cassie took a deep breath and knocked on Astra and Clover's door. Her mind was a complete blank and she noticed that her hands were trembling a bit out of sheer nervousness. She pulled a piece of boingtree gum out of her pocket. She found its mellow taste soothed her nerves. Then she unwrapped another for good measure and shoved it into her mouth. A vanishing garbage can stood nearby and Cassie tossed her wrappers into it. She wondered how she was going to connect with Astra. The Starling was a total sports fanatic and Cassie didn't know a star ball from a star…a star something.

She was chomping away, still hoping for some stellar inspiration, when the door slid open. Cassie's head snapped up. Astra stood there, a star ball tucked under her arm.

"Cassie!" said Astra. "I have the star ball game on. But I thought I heard something."

"Um, do you mind if I come in?"

"Of course not," said Astra, stepping aside. She slid the door closed behind them.

Cassie was so keyed up she was practically vibrating with nervous energy. She was certain that Astra would notice and get suspicious. But the girl turned back to her star ball game without another glance. Cassie looked around the room, which was both sporty and sleek, reflecting the personalities of the two roommates. It was her first visit to their room, and her eyes took in Astra's side, with its star ball court and shelves lined with

sporting equipment and startrophies of all shapes and sizes. The star ball game Astra was watching was playing on a screen that took up an entire wall. Clover's side had an extra-high ceiling and was filled with musical instruments and some technical-looking machines. Cassie noted with interest a terrarium, lush and green, built right into the floor.

"That's Stellar School playing Comet Prep a couple of weeks ago," said Astra, her eyes never leaving the screen. "We're playing Stellar on Bopday. They're really good, so I'm watching a holo-vid of their last couple of games to get some pointers on how to approach the game."

Cassie nodded. Sounded good.

"Just let me watch this last play and I'm all yours," said Astra.

"VALENCIA DODGES THE ONCOMING CENTER AND PIVOTS. SHE JUMPS! SHE SHOOTS! SHE SCORES!" the announcer shouted. The crowd went wild. Astra turned back to Cassie. "This game is over," she said, even though Comet Prep now had the ball. "It's all over but the sparkling."

"Oh," said Cassie, not understanding.

"There's not enough time left for them to tie," Astra explained. "So how can I help you?" she asked, cradling the star ball in the crook of her arm as if it was a baby.

Cassie wandered to the vase of glittery flowers, which never faded or lost their bloom, sitting on a table right between the two girls' sides of the room. She thought she'd try the direct approach one more time. "You know we all got these flowers, right?" she began.

Astra nodded distractedly.

"Well, Vega and I took one of the bouquets to the botany lab and found out that they are full of negative energy. Like off the charts. They were grown on the Isle of Misera. Everyone has gotten rid of their flowers but you. We think they are causing you and Clover to fight all the time." She paused to gauge Astra's reaction.

"That's ridiculous," Astra laughed. "They're so beautiful. And they smell so amazing. Like florafierces." She laughed again. "Though that crazy roommate of mine thinks they smell just like purple piphanies."

Cassie sighed. The flowers had worked their intoxicating magic on Astra. She had to come up with another plan. She had come to realize that these strange flowers smelled different to everyone. For example, she could only smell the strong odor of silverbellas. She figured that the blooms,

perhaps to entice you into not discarding them, gave off the smell of your own favorite flower. And she also knew from experience that it was impossible to convey that to someone who hadn't figured it out on her own. The silverbella odor was actually so strong to Cassie that it was overwhelming and very distracting. She found herself wanting to lean over and bury her nose in the blossoms. She countered this by taking a step back and concentrating on breathing only through her mouth.

Suddenly, she had a startacular idea. Okay, maybe it was a startacularly crazy idea. She'd find out soon enough.

"I just read this amazing holo-article about keeping flowers in your room," she fibbed. "It involves sports, so I thought you'd want to be the first to know."

"Really?" said Astra, leaning forward. She knew that Cassie read more than all the other Star Darlings put together, so it was perfectly reasonable that she would have seen a holo-article Astra had missed.

"Three…two…one," the announcer counted down, and a buzzer went off. "STELLAR SCHOOL WINS AGAIN! AND THE CROWD GOES WILD!"

Astra lowered the volume with a wave of her hand and turned toward Cassie with interest. Behind her, Cassie could see the players jumping up and down, huge grins on their faces, but she tried not to let it distract her from her mission.

"Well, the holo-article said that athletes should avoid having fresh flowers in their room before a big event," Cassie said. "Apparently, it weakens their powers of concentration."

Astra stared at her. "Really?" she said. She gave the flowers a quizzical look. "That's terrible! And here I have that big game coming up."

Cassie nodded sympathetically, biting her lip.

Astra tossed the star ball onto a chair and picked up the vase of flowers. With a confused expression on her face, she held them out to Cassie, whose heart skipped a beat. *Is my crazy idea actually going to work?* she thought.

Suddenly, Astra closed her eyes and brought the flowers to her nose. She took a deep sniff and her face grew serious. "I don't know," she said, hugging the flowers to her chest. "They just smell so good…."

Cassie stole a glance at the wall and spotted a holo-poster of a sporty-looking woman with her name emblazoned underneath. She winked at Cassie, as if in encouragement. Cassie hated to lie; in fact, it pained her to

do so. *But this is for Astra and Clover's own good,* she thought. *They'll be grateful when the flowers are gone and things can go back to normal.*

She took a deep breath and spoke. "Um, as a matter of fact, they interviewed a top athlete named Saturnia, who said as soon as she threw out a bouquet of flowers she had in her house, she felt so much better."

"Really?" said Astra, her eyes narrowing. "And they interviewed her recently?"

Cassie nodded. "Just this morning," she said. "This news is hot off the holo-presses."

"Aha!" Astra said with a laugh as she put down the flowers (but not before taking another long, deep sniff). "Good joke, Cassie!" she said. "You had me going until you brought up Saturnia. She's in training for the Starlympics and she's in a remote mountain location. She won't be giving any interviews for starmonths."

Oh, starf! thought Cassie. "Ha-ha, I almost got you!" she said weakly. "Good joke, huh?" Her heart sank. What was she going to do now? She had to come up with something—and quick. She scanned the room, looking for something—anything—that would give her some inspiration. Her eyes fell on a stick with a star-shaped net on its end propped up in the corner, and she picked it up. "The real reason I came over was to ask you for help. Believe it or not, I'm not doing very well in P.E."

"Physical Energy?" asked Astra, a shocked look on her face.

"Yes, Physical Energy," said Cassie. "I was wondering if you could teach me how to handle this star…" Her mind raced. What was that thing called, anyway?

"Starstick," said Astra. "It's called a starstick. You know, for playing Star-Away. It's an important skill to master. You've come to the right place." She raced to a closet, threw open the door, and started tossing sports equipment behind her. "There it is," she said, pulling out another starstick and a medium-sized ball. She tossed the ball into the net at the end of her stick and began to bounce it up and down. "You know, where you have to get the ball into your opponent's basket to score a point? It's a lot of fun."

"Riiiight," said Cassie, nodding. All these star sports were so similar to her she could never keep them straight.

After showing Cassie how to hold the starstick properly, Astra tossed her the ball. But Cassie's initial instinct was to duck. The ball hit the wall and bounced to the floor.

Astra shook her head. “You’re supposed to *catch* it, silly,” she explained. “Hand me the ball.” Cassie did and Astra placed it in her net and tried again. That time Cassie bobbled the ball for a moment but held on to it.

“Great job!” said Astra encouragingly. “Now toss it back to me.”

Cassie did. Her throw was off target and Astra had to lunge sideways. Still, she caught it neatly.

Toss after toss, Cassie began to fall into the rhythm. Scoop and toss, scoop and toss. “Hey, this is kind of fun!” she said.

“It is,” Astra agreed. “Just wait till you try star ball,” she added.

Cassie could see the flowers out of the corner of her eye, mocking her with their mere existence, their presence intensified by the cloying smell of silverbellas. Suddenly, she had another crazy idea. She had no idea if it would work. But she kept moving closer and closer to the vase of flowers. The two girls tossed the ball back and forth, back and forth as she made her way across the room.

She was within arm’s reach of the blooms. And suddenly, the front door slid open. Clover was standing there. Cassie saw her chance. She tossed the ball as far past Astra as she could, then scooped up the vase of flowers in the net of her starstick.

Astra jumped over her round red couch and made a flying leap, catching the ball.

“Duck!” Cassie cried to Clover. Looking puzzled, Clover did. And Cassie hurled the vase of flowers as hard as she could. Astra turned around, obviously pleased with her stellar catch. When she saw her beloved flowers hurtling through the air toward the open door, her mouth opened in shock. It seemed to Cassie as if everything was happening in slow motion: Astra’s loud “Noooooo!” and her desperate lunge for the flowers. But she was too late, for miraculously, Cassie’s aim was true. The flowers landed right inside the mouth of the waiting disappearing garbage can and then they were gone—instantly.

Cassie was panting hard as Clover straightened up. The roommates were both staring at Cassie in shocked silence. Astra scowled at her. “Cassie!” she shouted. “Why in the stars did you…” Then she noticed her roommate. “Clover!” she said pleasantly. “There you are! How did band practice go?”

“It was great,” said Clover. “Star salutations for asking. Did you have a fun time with Cassie?”

“I did,” said Astra. “Who knew Cassie was such a natural Star-Away player? Did you see that throw? I’m going to tell the coach we’ve got a brand-new hurler!”

And Cassie began to laugh. The last of the flowers were gone. Sure, she was still worried. There was still the question of who had sent them—and why. But she laughed anyway—with relief that the flowers were finally gone, with happiness that the roommates were back to normal, and also with pleasure that she had actually discovered a sport she enjoyed!

CHAPTER 6



Operation: Flower Disposal a success! The S.D. are now flower-free. Let's meet after dinner to talk about next steps!



Vega?



Scarlet?

No answer. Again. This was getting weird. Something must be wrong with the Star-Zaps' holo-connections, Cassie decided. There were a lot of missed messages lately. Cassie's stomach rumbled. She had worked up quite an appetite playing starstickball—or whatever it was called. She checked her Star-Zap. It wasn't quite dinnertime, but she didn't feel like being in her room any longer. She decided to take a stroll in the ozziefruit orchard before dinner.



Cassie meandered through the trees, which were heavy with fruit. The smell of ripe ozziefruit was mouth-watering. Flutterfocuses wafted among the

trees, and glimmerbees darted about, on a mission. She took a seat on a low stone wall and closed her eyes, enjoying the slight breeze and the gentle warmth of the late-afternoon sun on her upturned face.

"Cassie! What a nice starprise!" said someone with a familiar voice.

Cassie's eyes snapped open. A shadowy figure stood in front of her, blocking the sun. She squinted, but it wasn't until she shielded her eyes that she could see who it was. She gave an involuntary gasp.

"Lady Stella!" she said. "What are you doing here?"

Lady Stella laughed. "Just enjoying a pre-dinner stroll through the ozziefruit orchard, same as you," she answered. She motioned her head toward the stone wall. "Mind if I join you?" she asked.

"Not at all," said Cassie. She sat up straight and smoothed her skirt. She hadn't been alone with the headmistress since the day of her Starling Academy interview, many starmonths earlier. Truth be told, she found the headmistress, as lovely and kind as she was, a little intimidating.

Lady Stella smiled and sat down next to her. "I love the light this time of day," she said. "It's not as stunning as lightfall, but it has its own stark beauty. Everything looks so sharp and focused, you know?"

Cassie nodded. She did know. She felt the same way.

"And it's the perfect time to come to the orchards. Most people are getting ready for dinner, so you have them all to yourself."

Cassie nodded again. "Yes," she managed to say in agreement. She felt tongue-tied around the headmistress. She yearned to say something intelligent and thoughtful, but couldn't think of anything at the moment. Her face became warm and she knew that her cheeks were turning that unflattering shade of silver she so disliked.

"May I be frank with you, Cassie?" Lady Stella asked.

Cassie nodded nervously.

"You've been on my mind recently."

Cassie gulped. She had?

"I've been wanting to ask you a question. Why do you think you are here at Starling Academy? Why do you think you were chosen to be a Star Darling?"

Cassie took off her glasses and peered through them to grab a starmin to think. She had an idea, but she felt nervous about saying it aloud. She didn't want to seem like a braggart. So she shrugged.

“I only ask because you don’t seem as confident as you should be. Take it from me, Cassie. You know that you and your fellow Star Darlings were chosen for your strengths, and what you bring to the group, each something different. You are one of the most intuitive students I have ever come across in my career. You scored off the charts on the entrance exams.” Lady Stella gave her a sympathetic look. “You must learn to recognize your strengths and trust yourself.”

“St-star salutations,” said Cassie. She was both happy to have her suspicions confirmed and disappointed that she hadn’t spoken up for herself. It was an odd mix of emotions.

Lady Stella stood and turned to go, then turned back. “I know you are dreading your mission, Cassie,” she said. “I’d be a fool not to see it. But I am telling you that you have nothing to fear. You’re going to be a natural.”

“Star salutations, Lady Stella,” Cassie repeated. She watched the headmistress’s retreating back. Again she felt a rush of different feelings—embarrassment at being so transparent, relief that Lady Stella had faith in her, and hope that she would be successful when her mission actually happened. With a sigh, she headed to the Celestial Café for dinner. On her way, she thought she heard a rustling in the branches behind her. She turned around sharply, but no one was there.

When she walked into the bustling cafeteria and made her way to the Star Darlings’ table, she was struck by the sinking sun, which lit up the sky with its warm rosy tones. She knew that as soon as the beams hit the Crystal Mountains, the view would be even more spectacular, as prisms of rainbow light would begin to appear. But what really caught her attention was the fact that Astra and Clover were sitting side by side, looking quite chummy. As Cassie pulled out a chair and sat down, she saw the Bot-Bot waiter from that starmorning zoom up with the roommates’ drinks. He hesitated for a moment before placing them on the table.

Clover threw her arms up in front of Astra. “Don’t worry SL-D9,” she cried. “I’ve got you covered!” The two girls cracked up.

“Star salutations,” said the Bot-Bot sincerely as he carefully placed the drinks out of Astra’s reach.

Vega raised her eyebrows at Cassie, who nodded. Vega gave her a triple wink, the Starlandian way of silently telling someone “Good job!”

Scarlet came in and sat down next to Cassie. “All good?” she asked quietly.

Across the table, Clover laughed out loud. “Oh, Astra, you’re so funny!” she said.

Cassie grinned. “All good,” she said.

Dinner, for the first time in more than a double starweek, was extremely pleasant—argument- and drama-free. The girls talked and laughed and joked and traded bites of their dishes. Even Leona and Scarlet seemed to be getting along, or at least not fighting with each other, which was good enough in Cassie’s holo-book. Cassie had a huge smile on her face for the entire meal.

The Bot-Bot waiter came over to take their dessert order.

Tessa ordered first, as usual. “I’ll have an ozziefruit parfait and a mug of hot—” she began. Just then, their Star-Zaps chimed, all twelve at the same time. It made a pleasant, musical sound to Cassie’s ears.

Adora read the holo-text first. “Starmendous!” she said. She looked up. “Hey, everybody, listen to this! We’re invited to a party!”

The table started to buzz. A party! How fun! *It’s just what we all need,* thought Cassie. *A chance to relax and just enjoy ourselves for a couple of hours*. All the girls flipped open their Star-Zaps as the Bot-Bot waiter hovered nearby, forgotten. Gemma read the invitation out loud. “‘You are invited to a Star Mani/Pedi Party tonight after dinner in the Lightning Lounge’s party room. Hydrongs of polish colors to choose from, state-of-the-art starbeautychambers, music, dancing, a floating dessert bar…’” She paused. “What’s a floating dessert bar? We don’t have those in Solar Springs.”

Libby, who lived in a mansion and had been to too many fancy parties to count, supplied the answer. “Oh, you’ll love it! It’s a levitating cloudcandy table covered with every light-as-air dessert you’ve ever heard of,” she said. “You know—Aeropuffs, Floating Wisps, Featherwhispers. They’re so startastically delicious they just melt in your mouth. There are cocomoon starpillows and…”

“Say no more. I’m in,” said Tessa. She canceled her dessert order and stood up. The rest of the girls followed suit.

On her way out the door, Cassie spotted Ophelia sitting alone at a table, idly twirling a noddlenoodle on her fork and staring into space.

“I hope it’s not too crowded,” said Vega worriedly as they approached the Lightning Lounge. But when they pushed open the doors to the party room, they discovered they were the first to arrive.

“Oh, my stars!” said Sage, taking in the shifting, shimmering multicolored stars that were projected on the walls, floor, and ceiling; the multileveled dance floor; the colorful starbeautychambers, round and shiny; and the floating dessert bar, which was even better than it sounded, with edible fluffy pastel pink, blue, and yellow clouds of spun sugar candy suspended in the air. Nestled in the candyfloss were sweet little confections in all the colors of the rainbow. Tessa made a glitterbeeline for the sweets and loaded up a sparkling crystal plate with some carefully selected treats. The rest of the girls did the same. After eating three jujufruit gossamerwisps, which, she was pleased to discover, were as light and airy as they were delicious, Cassie’s mind returned to Ophelia, who’d been sitting all by herself in the cafeteria. She flipped open her Star-Zap and started typing.



Ophelia, we’re all at the Lightning Lounge, at a mani/pedi party. The desserts are out of this world! Come join us!



That sounds startacular! I’ll be right over!



We’re downstairs in the party room. See you soon!

Cassie smiled as she shut her Star-Zap. Her good deed for the day was done. Now she was ready for some beauty time.

“I don’t know why the rest of the students aren’t here,” said Adora as she reached up to grab a hunk of pale blue spun sugar candy, as fluffy as a cloud. “But that just means more dessert for us!”

Cassie walked across the room and hesitated in front of a silvery chamber, unsure what to do next. Libby appeared at her side. “Let me help you,” she said. “My mom has one,” she explained. “Starbeautychambers can give you manicures, pedicures, haircuts and styles, facials, body scrubs, face sparklings, you name it.” She pressed a round button on the side and the chamber opened like a flower, revealing a holo-screen, a fluffy white seat, and four covered pods. “That’s where you put your hands and feet,” she explained. Cassie took off her silver slippers and lowered herself onto the cozy-looking seat. She gasped at how luxuriously soft it was.

Libby nodded. “Amazing, right?”

The holo-screen slid into place at lap level. The shape of a hand appeared on the screen, and Cassie hovered her palm over it, looking to Libby for confirmation. Libby nodded. “Put your hand right on it,” she said encouragingly. Cassie obliged and a list of nail polish colors in her signature shade appeared on the right-hand side of the screen. When she touched the name of the polish with her free hand, an image of the color was projected on her nails so she could make a well-informed decision. Cassie considered them all. Silver Streak was pretty-ish; Icicle a bit too frosty; Sassy Sparkles not quite as tasteful as she’d like; Time of Shadows White too austere; and Storm Queen a little too gray. She thought she’d love Pink Snowflake but was just lukewarm about it. Finally, Magic and Moonbeams came up. She gasped with delight. It was pure perfection. Sparkly, iridescent, and silvery white, it glowed with the promise of stardust and enchantment. She chose it for both her fingers and toes and slipped her hands and feet inside the pods. They were immediately enveloped in warm lotion that smelled just like glimmerdrop cookies. Cassie closed her eyes and a scene came flooding back: a day she had come home from school to find her mom, her cheeks flushed and her silvery hair escaping from her bun and framing her face. She had been baking all day and presented Cassie with a plate of warm cookies, which Cassie munched as she told her mom all about her day. It brought a sweet smile to her face and Cassie pressed the memory function on her Star-Zap to record it so she’d be able to watch it on-screen whenever she liked. A Bot-Bot masseuse zoomed up and began to knead her shoulders, which were slightly achy from the vigorous game of Star-Away she had played earlier. Ah, that was heavenly. Her chamber began to softly play “Brighter Than a Comet,” one of her favorite songs, and she hummed along. Once her hands and feet were sufficiently moisturized, they were massaged. Then the nails were trimmed and shaped, and finally the polish was applied.

Vega, who had gone back to the floating dessert bar for seconds, was on her way to get her own mani/pedi. She scanned the room and leaned over Cassie’s chamber to talk to her privately. “If the whole school was invited, why are there only twelve chambers?” she asked. “That’s not even close to enough.”

That’s a good question, Cassie thought, but then the pods released her hands and feet and she saw her fingers and toes, polished to a silvery perfection. “Oh,” she breathed. “I picked the most perfect color ever.”

Vega shrugged and headed to a shiny blue starbeautychamber.

"Cassie, let me see," called Adora from a sky-blue starbeautychamber nearby.

Cassie stood and walked to her. She considered putting her shoes back on but didn't want to cover up her sparkling toes. Adora leaned over to take a look. "Pretty," she said. A Bot-Bot masseuse was giving her a neck massage as she picked her polish color. "I can't decide between Cerulean Circus for my fingers," she said, clicking on it, "or Starbeam Dream." She looked up to Cassie for help. "Oh…um," said Cassie. They looked exactly the same to her. "Definitely Starbeam Dream," she finally said.

"You're right," said Adora. "It's much prettier." She didn't seem to need any help choosing Indigo Spell for her toes.

When everyone's nails were done, the girls reclined on overstuffed couches and admired each other's fingers and toes as they sipped tall sparkling drinks brought to them by hovering Bot-Bot waiters. Then the lights dimmed. The starlight show began to flash faster and the music got louder. Cassie was pleased to note that Leona was the first to jump up and begin to dance—barefoot, of course. Her fingers and toes sparkled in the dim light; she had chosen a polish that made her nails look as if they had been dipped in liquid gold, which Cassie took as another sign that she was improving. Leona crooked her finger, beckoning to Cassie, who began to shake her head, her usual self-conscious response. But the idea of everyone's eyes on her as she moved to the beat, which usually unnerved her, suddenly seemed like an appealing one. She jumped up and bopped over to Leona, who grinned and grabbed her hands. The two began to spin around and around, then broke apart and twirled in the empty space. Cassie closed her eyes and moved to the music, freely and joyously. She didn't worry that she looked silly, and she didn't care what anyone was thinking of her. All she knew was that she felt beautiful, and fluid, and natural—and like she never wanted to stop moving to the music. After a few minutes, the rest of the girls joined in. They were a jumping, twirling, grinning mass. They danced until they couldn't dance anymore, then flopped onto the couches in happy exhaustion.

Cassie closed her eyes, breathing hard. She opened her eyes to see Sage leaning over her. She was still laughing.

"Cassie, get up, it's time for bed," she said.

“All right, all right.” Cassie swung her feet to the floor and reluctantly slipped on her shoes. With a sigh, she stood up. She admired her fingernails again under the flashing lights. “Wow,” Cassie said. “I really picked the best color.”

Adora grabbed her arm. “I thought you liked Starbeam Dream,” she said almost inaudibly.

“The music’s too loud,” said Cassie. “What did you say?”

“I said, I thought you liked Starbeam Dream.”

Cassie shrugged. “Glad you like it, too,” she said. She looked at Vega. “Are you coming with us?” she asked.

“You should go, you shouldn’t wait,” Vega said, pointing to Piper, who was sipping a sea-green beverage through a straw. “I will wait for my roommate.”

Cassie was sleepy. “Okay, I’ll see you all in the…”

“Morning,” finished Piper.

Clover stood and threw her arms around Cassie.

“See you at breakfast, Clover,” Cassie said.

“Wait for me,” said Leona. But then she never got up, so Cassie and Sage shrugged and headed back to their room. They chatted and giggled all the way back to the dorm. Cassie tumbled into bed, fully intending to get up in a starsec to use her toothlight and sparkle her face, but she found she was so tired she couldn’t move. She couldn’t even muster the energy to ask Sage to please quiet down. The girl was still giggling.

Weird, she thought. *Ophelia never showed up at the party. Something better must have come up. Maybe she’s not as lonely as Leona thinks she is.*

Sage rolled over, trying, and failing, to muffle a laugh.

I am so much better at falling asleep than Sage, Cassie thought. And she was right. She drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER 7

When Cassie awoke the next morning, she felt starmendous—so much so that she said it out loud. “I feel starmendous,” she said. No, that wasn’t quite right. “I *am* starmendous,” she tried. Yes, that was much better.

She stepped out of bed and stubbed her toe. “Moons and stars!” she cried. “That hurt!”

She looked to her roommate, whose head was resting on her lavender pillowcase, for sympathy. Sage looked back at her and giggled.

“Sage!” said Cassie with a scowl. “I hurt myself!”

“I know,” said Sage, trying to make a sad face and failing miserably. “But something about it is pretty funny.”

“No,” said Cassie earnestly. “It’s actually not.”

But apparently that was very amusing to Sage, too.

With as much dignity as she could muster, Cassie hobbled her way to the sparkle shower room. Even though her toe was throbbing, she couldn’t help admiring herself in the mirror, her gossamer silvery-pink hair looking so, well, gossamery and lovely around her pale face.



Cassie stood on the Cosmic Transporter, on her way to breakfast, staring into space. Suddenly, she was startled by someone skipping by, almost knocking her over. She peered after her. *Was that Scarlet?* she wondered.

When Cassie arrived in the cafeteria, she found Scarlet and Piper already sitting at the table. Piper's amazingly long seafoam green hair was pulled back into a rippling ponytail. Cassie chose the seat next to her. "Good…" she started.

"Morning," Piper said pleasantly.

Leona and Adora arrived next. "I'm not hungry," Leona said. "I ran into Ophelia this morning and she gave me this delicious zoomberry turnover from the huge care package she just got. So I'm just going to get a cup of hot…"

"Zing," said Piper.

Leona gave her a funny look. "Ozziefruit tea," she said, correcting her.

Vega arrived next and sat on the other side of Cassie. She was followed by Astra and Clover, who sat on the other side of the table.

"Last night was so much fun," said Clover.

Vega nodded. "We did our nails, had snacks, and more."

Clover nodded. "Yes, we did!"

"It certainly was not a bore," Vega finished.

The Bot-Bot waiter arrived and began to take their breakfast orders. Cassie ordered a bowl of druderwomp flakes with starberries.

Moons and stars, that was a good order, Cassie thought. She addressed Adora, who sat across from her. "I hope you don't have breakfast envy!"

"I think I'll like mine better," said Adora.

"Starscuse me?" said Cassie.

"I think I'll like mine better," repeated Adora.

"Um…what?" said Cassie.

"I said I think I'll like mine better," Adora said patiently.

"Uh…that's great," said Cassie, who still couldn't understand what the girl was saying but was too embarrassed to ask her to repeat it a third time.

When it was Leona's turn, she thought for a moment and ordered starcakes and tinsel toast with a slice of mooncheese.

Sage giggled. "I thought you said you weren't hungry!"

"What are you talking about?" said Leona.

Breakfast arrived in record time. Tessa took a bite, then got a confused look on her face. "Starscuse me," she said politely to the Bot-Bot, "but I

asked for starberry waffles. These are moonberry."

"Star apologies," said the Bot-Bot waiter. "That is highly irregular. I'll fix that right away." He zoomed back to the kitchen and returned a few starmins later.

Tessa dug in to her new breakfast excitedly, took a bite, then shook her head. "Moonberries again!" she exclaimed. "How…"

"Delightful," finished Piper.

"No, how odd," she said.

"I hate moonberries," said Sage disgustedly. But she punctuated her statement with a delighted laugh.

Sage's giggle is really annoying, thought Cassie. *It would be so much less annoying if she had a sweet, tinkling laugh. Kind of like…* She thought for a minute. *Kind of like mine,* she decided. She practiced it, putting her hand over her mouth and tittering. She nodded. It was musical and quite pleasant.

Cassie's day went on starmendously. She felt emboldened enough to raise her hand in every class, even when she wasn't quite sure of the answer. And when every eye in the class was focused on her, somehow it didn't feel intimidating at all. *That was some pep talk Lady Stella gave me yestarday,* she thought.

At the end of the day it was time for their Star Darlings lessons. Cassie settled into her usual seat in the soundproof classroom. She was starprised to see a new, unfamiliar teacher in front of the room. She was one of the youngest teachers Cassie had ever seen, with super-short magenta hair that stuck up from her head in tiny spikes. She wore swirly leggings in shades of pink, red, and orange, a fitted jacket (which the Star Darlings would soon discover, as the class went on, changed color every ten starmins), and shiny orange boots.

"Hello, class," she said, standing and walking up and down the aisles as she spoke. "I am Kiri Lillibelle and I am thrilled to be your guest lecturer today. You may not know me, but I am certainly familiar with each and every one of you. I am the researcher who hand-selects all of your—"

"Outfits," offered Piper.

Kiri gave her a quizzical look. "No, Mirror Mantras," she said. "A Mirror Mantra is a very important part of a successful Wish Mission. By repeating your Mirror Mantra while gazing into a mirror, you will receive strength and centeredness. When you recite it together with your Wisher

down on Wishworld, you can bring clarity and focus to her that will aid in wish fulfillment."

She began to walk around the room as she spoke. "Mirror Mantras used to be presented to Starling Academy students upon graduation. We had four staryears to determine the perfect message for each student. The timing was a little tighter for you Star Darlings," she said with a laugh. "But we were able to determine the correct mantras for each of you."

"How do you choose them?" asked Libby with a yawn.

"An excellent question," said Kiri. "They were carefully selected based on each of your personalities, strengths, and challenges."

"Challenges?" asked Astra.

"Yes, challenges," said Kiri. "It is not just your strengths that make you the special person you are, but also your challenges and how you face them."

"But we already know our mantras," said Leona. "They were assigned to us as soon as we found out we were Star Darlings."

"Yes," said Kiri patiently. "But we've determined that the more you use them before your Wish Mission, the more their strength will increase. We want you to become as familiar with your mantra as you are with your own name. We want to make sure that they become second nature to you, and that you use them to their fullest potential. We want you to know your mantras forwards and backwards."

The girls nodded.

"So let's begin!" The classroom door opened and a bevy of Bot-Bot assistants flew into the room, each holding a floating holo-mirror, which it placed in front of a student. Cassie gazed at herself and found herself taking off her starglasses to get a closer look at her eyelashes. They were so thick and lush! How had she never noticed them before? They were pretty starmazing, actually. She was about to lean over and ask Leona if she had noticed her lashes before—and, if so, why she had never called them to Cassie's attention—when Kiri began to speak again.

"Okay," she said. "Now let's go around the room and recite your mantras for each other. Why don't you start?" she asked, pointing to Sage, who sat in the front of the room.

Sage giggled nervously and cleared her throat. She gazed into the mirror levelly. "I believe in you," she said. "Glow for it!"

Even from the back of the room, Cassie could see that Sage's reflection took on a brilliant glow.

"Look at her reflection!" Kiri cried to the class. "Her glow is intensifying even here on Starland! This is some pretty powerful stuff!"

She turned back to Sage. "Okay," said Kiri. "How did that make you feel?"

"I felt really energized," Sage said with a laugh. "While I definitely felt the power of the mantra when I used it on Wishworld, I felt something extra just now. Maybe my mantra has even more power than I realized."

Kiri nodded enthusiastically. "That's exactly it. We're thinking that we have not yet taken full advantage of the power of the mantras. And we think that you as Star Darlings may have even greater mantra powers than the other students."

The room began to buzz with excitement. When they quieted down, Kiri went around the room and had the rest of the Star Darlings recite their mantras, one by one.

"It's all in the balance. Glimmer and shine!" said Libby, her pink ponytail shimmering.

Leona said: "You are a star. Light up the world!"

Scarlet reached into her back pocket for her drumsticks and beat out a drumroll on top of her desk before stating: "Abracadabra—time for some star power!" And even she looked impressed by the burst of sparkle in her reflection.

"Dreams can come true," said Piper when it was her turn. "It's your time to shine!"

"Stronger you make challenges," said Astra with a wide grin. "Glowin' get to time!"

"Huh?" said Kiri.

Astra blinked at Kiri innocently. "I thought you said you wanted us to know our mantras forwards and backwards!"

Kiri shook her head and moved on to the next Star Darling.

"Let your heart lead the way," Tessa said, smiling at her reflection.

Her little sister went next. "Make up your mind to blaze like a comet!" Gemma shouted.

Clover adjusted her purple hat and said, "Keep the beat and shine like the star you are!"

Hmmm, thought Cassie. *That's not a bad mantra at all. Maybe Clover got mine by mistake?* She hesitated. She knew that Kiri was waiting for her to speak, but for some reason she just didn't want to say her mantra out loud. She had gladly accepted it when she had first received it, but it suddenly didn't seem right to her at all.

Kiri smiled at her encouragingly. "Come on, Cassie, let's hear it," she said.

Cassie sighed. "Listen to your feelings. Let your inner light sparkle," she said in a monotone. She was surprised to see that her reflection got extra sparkly even though her heart wasn't in it.

"What's wrong, Cassie?" Kiri asked. "That's a lovely mantra, if I do say so myself."

Cassie shrugged. Suddenly, she had an idea—a brilliant one, in fact. "Do you ever change people's mantras?" she asked.

Kiri was clearly taken aback. "Are you pulling my leg?" she said.

Gemma stood up to take a look. "No, she isn't," she told Kiri seriously. "She's not even touching you!"

Astra snorted. "Good one, Gemma!"

"I was thinking of something a little more star-forward," said Cassie slowly.

"Star-forward?" asked the teacher, her brow wrinkled.

"You know," said Cassie. "Exciting. Vibrant. Like 'You are totally startacular.' Or maybe 'You are starmendously talented,'" she suggested.

Kiri was frowning as she studied Cassie. "But the Mirror Mantras are carefully chosen to reflect each student's personality," she said. "A lot of work went into each one. I don't think I've ever heard of a student requesting a new mantra in Starling Academy history."

Cassie shrugged. It just didn't seem like such a great fit anymore. It was kind of…boring.

Kiri opened her mouth as if she was going to say something, clearly thought better of it, and turned to the next student. "Adora?" she said. "It's your turn."

And Adora said, "Use your logic. You are a star!"

Kiri shook her head. She was clearly getting frustrated. "Well, apparently Adora is not ready to share yet. We'll get back to you la—"

And that was when all the Star-Zaps went off. Cassie looked down at the message: SD WISH ORB IDENTIFIED. PROCEED TO LADY STELLA'S OFFICE

IMMEDIATELY. The girls all shot each other quick looks, then began to make their way out of the classroom. It was time.

CHAPTER 8

Usually, when Cassie headed to Lady Stella's office for the Wish Orb reveal, her stomach was in knots. She would look at her fellow Star Darlings who had not yet been chosen for their Wish Missions and silently hope that it was their turn, instead of hers. She'd be ready, she would tell herself, next time. Just one more reprieve, and she'd be ready. But then she never was.

But this time was different. Cassie knew she was ready. And she also knew that there was no better choice for this mission than she. In fact, she was sure of it.

Cassie calmly made her way to Lady Stella's office, where she sat at the shiny silver table until all the Star Darlings were gathered. Then she patiently waited her turn as they all made their way down the hidden staircase behind Lady Stella's desk into the cool, dark secret caves underneath Halo Hall. Scarlet was just in front of her, and in the gloom Cassie noticed a silvery white bitbat land briefly on the girl's shoulder. *That's odd,* she thought. Bitbats were notoriously skittish. Soon they entered the special Star Darlings Wish Cavern. Cassie took in the scene—sunlight shining through the glass roof, golden waterfalls of wish energy streaming down the sides, the garden they stood in green and abundant. The glowing Wish Orbs still in the ground waiting for the moment when they would be

ready now numbered just six. It was clearly impossible for the place to exist deep underground, yet there it was, right in front of their eyes. The girls moved to the grass-covered platform in the middle of the Wish Cavern and waited for the chosen Wish Orb to emerge. They did not have to wait long. A shaft of sunlight lit up the center of the platform and the orb burst out. Cassie never took her eyes off the glowing globe. This time, instead of circling the room quickly, or pausing at each Star Darling as if trying to decide who it belonged to, the orb simply zoomed right up to one student: Cassie. She held out one hand confidently, motioning for the orb with the other as if to say, *Get over here right now.* The Wish Orb nestled right into her open palm. Everyone stared at Cassie in disbelief.

Even Lady Stella looked very starprised. "Cassie, the Wish Orb has chosen you," she said, which seemed unnecessary, since Cassie was already cradling the glowing orb in her hands. "Are you okay?" she asked, craning her neck to look searchingly into Cassie's eyes.

"Of course," said Cassie. "Why wouldn't I be?"



As Cassie sat on her bed the morning of her mission, finalizing her arrival outfit with the help of the Wishworld Outfit Selector function on her Star-Zap, she wondered why she had feared that day so much. Everyone acted like being picked to go on a Wish Mission was such a big deal, and now that Cassie was the chosen one, it didn't seem monumental at all. For stars' sake, even Ophelia had gone on a mission. (Granted hers had been a startacularly terrible mess.) Cassie couldn't understand it. She flipped through the Wishworld outfits she had picked for the rest of her trip. They were all perfectly coordinated, down to the shoes and socks. She said her mantra to herself, annoyed that she hadn't been able to change it. "Listen to your feelings. Let your inner light sparkle," she repeated unenthusiastically. Her mantra was a dud; there was no doubt about that.

She glanced at her Star-Zap. It was time to head to the Wishworld Surveillance Deck. She picked up her Star-Zap, then decided to send a quick holo-text to Ophelia, who she hadn't seen since that day in the Celestial Café.



Hey! I enjoyed our talk. Let's get together soon so we can start making you sparkle! I'll be in touch….

She snapped her phone shut. "Time to go?" she said to Sage, who chuckled as if Cassie had said something amusing.

"Time to go!" Sage said. "Is there any last-minute advice I can give you?"

Cassie shook her head. "No, I'm good."



Cassie paused for a minute in front of the glass doors that led to the Wishworld Surveillance Deck. "You go ahead," she said to Sage. She slipped a pair of safety starglasses over her own star-shaped glasses and took stock of herself. Though she would soon be taking off into the heavens attached to a wild shooting star and landing in an unfamiliar world, she didn't feel any flutterfocuses taking flight in her belly. She looked down at her hands, which were not even close to trembling; they were as still as a piece of starmarble. She was cool, calm, and collected.

She pushed open the door and was immediately mobbed by Star Darlings wearing safety starglasses in a rainbow of colors. She looked around at everyone. Someone was missing. "Where's Libby?" she asked.

"She was still sleeping," offered Gemma. "I couldn't get her out of bed."

"Get out of here," Cassie said.

A perplexed look crossed Gemma's face. Then she shrugged. "Okay," she said. She turned around and headed inside.

Cassie started after her, but then Vega leaned in for a hug and Cassie caught a glimpse of herself in the lenses of Vega's blue safety starglasses. Cassie smiled at herself. She really did look great in white.

"So this is it," she said to Vega. "Anything to share before I go?"

"Your Wisher is now busy wishin'," Vega replied.

"That's true," said Cassie.

"Lots of luck upon your mission," Vega concluded.

"Thanks," said Cassie.

Clover stepped up and threw her arms around Cassie, nearly knocking her over. "Good luck, Cassie!" she cheered.

Adora was next. "Are you nervous, Cassie?" she said.

Huh? "Um…thanks," replied Cassie. She was suddenly surrounded by a group all eager to say their good-byes—Tessa, Scarlet, Leona, and then Astra. Finally, Piper stepped forward.

"Wish me luck," Cassie said to her. "Not that I—"

"Will listen!" said Piper.

"Need it," finished Cassie.

The last people to bid farewell to her were Lady Cordial and Lady Stella. Lady Cordial handed Cassie her silver backpack, and Cassie slipped it over her arm, giving the silver stuffed star a squeeze. "Star salutations," she told Lady Cordial.

Cassie stepped forward to join Lady Stella on the edge of the surveillance deck and found she couldn't move. She looked down in confusion. That's when she realized that someone had tied her shoelaces together!

"Really, Starlings?" she said as bent down to tie them properly. "That is so not funny." *Someone must be very jealous of me and my Wish Mission,* she thought. But everyone looked back at her innocently.

Lady Stella helped her to her feet and put her arm around Cassie's shoulder She pointed to the Star Wranglers throwing out their lassos made of wish energy. "You'll be on your way any starmin now," she said. She turned so she could look directly at Cassie. "And now some last-minute advice," she said, her eyes shining. "It's to trust your instincts. As I mentioned to you, your intuitive powers are startacular. And also recognize that you have the power to shape your feelings. Feeling nervous? Use your energy to turn it into excitement. But most of all, believe in yourself."

Cassie nodded. "I'm going to do a startastic job," she said.

Lady Stella nodded. "Of course you are." But Cassie thought she saw a look of starprise in her eyes. She gave Cassie a searching look that made her feel like a starquark under a holo-scope.

"You seem a little different today," Lady Stella said, a look of concern on her usually serene face.

"I am," said Cassie. "I am."

CHAPTER 9

Cassie stood in front of a large, long building, knowing that her Wisher was somewhere inside, feeling utterly miserable. It was cold, it was muddy, and it was rainy. And rain on Wishworld was nothing like the rain back home. It was decidedly unsparkly and rather than being a gentle refreshing mist it was actually quite, well, *wet*. Her clothes were soaked clean through.

With a sigh she accessed her Wishworld Outfit Selector and changed from the adorable but now sopping silver platform sandals (for height as well as fashion), light floaty white top with spaghetti straps, and pair of pink-and-white wide-legged pants that ended just below the knee into a more weather appropriate ensemble—cozy leggings; an oversized pale pink sweater, toasty as a blanket; and rubber boots. She also added a waterproof coat with a hood which she pulled up to cover her now platinum-blond hair with pale pink tips. Then she bent to fish the shooting star out of the brown muck, gave it a shake, folded it up, and placed it in her backpack, right next to her safety starglasses.

She made her first observation, which she knew would be recorded in her Cyber Journal. *Wish Mission 6, Wishworld Observation #1: Be sure to be fully prepared for all Wishworld weather conditions because you never know what you might need. You'll save yourself some time and annoyance.*

She took another deep breath and exhaled, marveling at the billowing white cloud she created. Then she squared her shoulders and marched forward in her rubbery boots. After waiting a moment for the heavy-looking metal door to slide open, she realized she had to push it to get inside. *Look out, Wisher, here I come,* she thought.

The hallway was long and appeared to be empty. Cassie stood dripping on the floor, her glasses foggy from the sudden warmth. She sighed. Wishworld was one annoyance after another so far.

"Well, hello there, young lady."

Cassie turned around quickly in the direction of the voice, and the combination of her quick movement, her slippery boots, and the wet floor caused her feet to slide right from underneath her. *Moons and stars!* she thought as her feet scrabbled on the floor, looking for purchase. The next thing she knew, she was flat on her back, staring up at the ceiling. *Oof.*

A face appeared in her line of vision—a woman's face, staring down at her and looking concerned. "Oh, my goodness, are you okay?" she asked.

"I'm fine," said Cassie with a sigh. This was not a stellar way to begin her first Wish Mission! Luckily, the only thing that was bruised was her dignity.

The woman squinted at Cassie through a small pair of glasses perched on her nose. She was clearly trying to place her—and failing. "I'm sorry," she said. "But I don't recognize you. Who are you?" She sniffed the air. "And why does it smell just like my mother's hummingbird cake?" she mused. "Boy does that take me back."

Now was as good a time as any. Cassie took off her foggy glasses and stared up into the woman's eyes. "My name is Cassie. I am the new student in school," she said. *Will it work upside down?* she wondered.

It did. "Your name is Cassie, you are the new student in school," the woman repeated as she helped Cassie to her feet. "There you go!" she said, drying her wet hands on her pant legs. "Welcome to Mountain View School, Cassie. I am Principal McIlhenney."

"Thank you," said Cassie, mentally congratulating herself for remembering the Wishling phrase for gratitude. She bent down, pretending to tuck her leggings into her boots, and stole a glance at her Star-Zap for directions to her Wisher's location. "I belong in room 261," she told the woman as she straightened up.

"You belong in room 261," the woman echoed with a nod. "That's Ms. Olds's room. I'll take you right there." She paused. "But we'll go to your new locker so you can store your things."

Cassie followed the woman down the hallway and was delighted with the small metal closet—or "locker"—she was given. There was just enough room for her dripping coat, which she was happy to dispose of. She envisioned the small top section of the locker filled with books. Paper books. *I can hardly wait to get my hands on them,* she thought.

"Ready?" asked Principal McIlhenney.

"Ready!" said Cassie, slamming her locker shut with a clang.

Cassie slung her silver backpack over her shoulder and followed the principal down the hallway. The woman paused in front of a display opposite the stairwell. Cassie looked up. There was a photo of a serious-looking girl with straight dirty-blond hair pulled back in a headband. STUDENT OF THE MONTH, it said below her photo. "Each month a student is chosen to be honored in this way," the principal said. She turned to Cassie and smiled. "Annabel here has received the award for three months running. It's awarded to a very special student who not only excels academically but also sets an example for the other students with words and actions. Maybe someday it will be you." Cassie felt a rush of warmth to her face. *Well, of course I'd be Student of the Month if I attended your school,* Cassie thought. *I'd probably be Student of the Year if that was possible!* She nodded politely and they continued up the stairs and down the hall, then stopped at the door of her new classroom. Principal McIlhenney turned to her and gave her a reassuring smile. "You'll like Ms. Olds," she said. "She's really kind and she's a good teacher."

Cassie nodded, recognizing the symbols on the classroom door from her Wishers 101 class when they had studied Wishworld holidays. They were bright green stemmed leaves with an interesting shape. "I like those… valentines!" she said. "Is it Halloween already?"

The principal chuckled. "Good one, Cassie!" She leaned toward her. "But Ms. Olds already has one class clown. She doesn't need another!" She rapped on the door, then turned to Cassie and smiled again. "Are you ready? Don't be nervous, now."

"Oh, I'm not nervous at all," said Cassie, giving the principal an odd glance for suggesting such a thing.

The woman looked surprised. "Good for you!" she said.

The door was opened by a kind-looking woman with medium-length brown hair. She wore a bright red sweater with white flowers on it. "Principal McIlhenney!" she said. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Cassie immediately filed that Wishling expression away as *Mission 6, Wishworld Observation #2. I have a great ear for charming Wishling expressions,* she thought.

The principal stepped through the doorway and a hush fell over the classroom, just like when Lady Stella made a surprise visit to a Starling Academy classroom or appeared as a multi-classroom holo-image to make an announcement. Principal McIlhenney introduced Cassie to her new teacher. While the adults talked, Cassie looked around the classroom, trying to see if she could pick out her Wisher. The students all looked back at her curiously. *Get ready, Wisher,* thought Cassie. *This is your lucky day. Your wish is about to be granted!* But although she knew the student had to be somewhere in the room, there wasn't even the tiniest flicker in her glasses —her Wish Pendant.

As Ms. Olds walked Cassie to her new desk, remarking that the air suddenly smelled like deep-dish blueberry pie, Principal McIlhenney said her good-byes and left. The class relaxed visibly after she was gone. Cassie scanned the room again. Still no glow. *That's odd,* she thought. *Could I be in the wrong classroom?* She looked at the directions on her Star-Zap. Classroom 261, just like the sign on the door. *Could my Wisher be absent?* There was one empty seat in the row next to hers in the back of the room….

"Cell phones are not allowed in class," said someone in a snippy voice.

Cassie smiled at the girl, who sat in the first seat in the row next to hers. She was wearing a pale pink sweater and a plaid skirt. She was neat and tidy, not a dirty-blond hair on her head out of place.

"Thanks for the tip," said Cassie, slipping her Star-Zap into her sweater pocket. The girl stared back, unsmiling. Cassie took a closer look. "Aren't you the Student of the Month?" she said to her.

"That's me," the girl said. "Annabel Victor. And I'm going to be Student of the Month this month, too. It'll be announced at the end of the day tomorrow."

"Well, good for you," said Cassie. The girl was obnoxious, but she certainly was sure of herself; Cassie had to give her that. She sat back in her decidedly uncomfortable Wishworld seat. *I guess I'll just sit back and observe,* thought Cassie. *Blend in and get to the bottom of this Wish*

Mission. She knew that she'd have it all figured out by lunchtime. She was sure of it.

She sat patiently as Ms. Olds took attendance and then asked everyone to take out their science books. Cassie was thrilled when the teacher handed her her very own copy, and she flipped through the pages excitedly. A quick glance told her that some of the information inside was hopelessly out of date, but she loved the book anyway—the weight of it in her hands, the slickness of the paper, the colorful illustrations and photographs on every page.

"Class, it's time to get out your homework," Ms. Olds said. Just as the students began to reach into their backpacks, the door burst open. There stood a tall, thin girl with long shiny black hair, clutching her books to her chest. She had a wide pleasant face and bright blue eyes that sparkled with mischief.

Cassie's glasses immediately began to glow. So this was her Wisher!

CHAPTER 10

Annabel scowled at her. “Those glasses have to be against the rules!” she said. “They’re very distracting!”

“Lila, you’re late,” Ms. Olds scolded gently. “What happened?”

Lila looked around the room. Cassie noticed that almost all the students were staring at her with great interest, waiting to see what happened next. She shook her head dramatically, clearly enjoying the spotlight. “It was the sign!” she said. “The one down the block, at the crosswalk.” She had a wide grin, and Cassie saw a flash of silver when she spoke. *Interesting,* she thought. *Could that be a clue?*

Ms. Olds shook her head, but there was a smile on her face. “And tell us, Lila. How did a sign manage to make you late for school today?”

Lila grinned, clearly relishing the line she was about to deliver. “It said ‘School Zone. Slow down.’ So I did!”

The rest of the class laughed. They obviously liked Lila a lot.

“Sit down, Lila,” said Ms. Olds, but in a kind way. “It’s time to turn in your homework.”

Lila still stood in the aisle. “Ms. Olds, would you ever get mad at me for something I didn’t do?” she asked.

Ms. Olds frowned. “Of course not, Lila,” she said.

“That’s good, because I didn’t do my homework!” said Lila. “Just kidding!”

The class burst into laughter.

“It’s time to sit down, Lila,” the teacher repeated.

Lila paused next to Cassie’s desk on her way down the aisle. “Hey, new girl,” she said. “What’s your name?”

“Cassie,” she replied.

“What school did you come from?” Lila asked.

That was a tough one. “Star…Starfield Preparatory School of…um…Preparedness,” Cassie heard herself saying. *Ugh.* Why had she said that? What a ridiculous name.

But the girl laughed. “You’re funny!”

Lila sat down, and the homework was collected. Students passed their papers up the row and then the first person in each row passed them across. Ms. Olds noticed that one boy’s homework was missing, though he insisted he had turned it in. But it was nowhere to be found. Finally, Ms. Olds turned on a monitor and three images were projected onto the whiteboard in the front of the room.

“Today we are going to discuss gravity. Now, who can tell me which of these photos illustrates this force?”

Several hands shot up.

“Yes, Kristie?” Ms. Olds said. “Come show us.”

Kristie stood and walked to the front of the room. She pointed to a picture of a ball going through a basketball hoop. “Gravity is what pulls the ball back to the ground so it doesn’t go shooting off into space,” she said.

“That’s right,” said Ms. Olds. “Thank you, Kristie.”

Kristie returned to her seat, stumbling on her way down the aisle. Cassie noticed that she gave Annabel a dirty look.

“You tripped me!” she hissed.

“Why are you looking at me?” said Annabel innocently. “I didn’t do anything!”

“Settle down class,” said Ms. Olds. “Now who can tell me who *discovered* gravity?”

Lila raised her hand. “I can, I can!” she said.

“Yes, Lila?” asked Ms. Olds.

“Kristie did!”

Ms. Olds sighed. “Anyone else?”

“Actually, it was…” Lila started.

But Annabel spoke over her. “It was Sir Isaac Newton,” she said, giving Lila a disgusted look. “He published his finding in 1687,” she added.

“That is correct, Annabel,” said Ms. Olds. “Nicely done.”

“As usual,” muttered the boy who sat behind Annabel. She turned around and gave him a smirk.

Ms. Olds continued with a discussion of the force of gravity and Cassie tuned out, choosing to spend the rest of the class trying to figure out what Lila could be wishing for. She considered the evidence. She was clearly well liked by most of her classmates and she was certainly very funny. So Cassie could probably rule out a friendship wish. Could it have something to do with her family? A friend? A pet? Cassie sighed. It could be practically anything at that point.

Finally, it was time for lunch. “Annabel,” said Ms. Olds. “Will you please show Cassie to the lunchroom?”

“Of course, Ms. Olds,” said Annabel with a sweet smile.

Cassie followed her out of the classroom and they walked to the cafeteria in silence. Annabel paused at the entrance and turned to Cassie. Her sweet smile was gone.

“I hope you don’t plan on sitting with me and my friends,” she said. “Because you are definitely not invited.” She turned and flounced off, waving to a group of girls already at a table.

Cassie stared after her, a look of disgust on her face. “That girl deserves a bowl of—” she looked at the menu offerings displayed on the wall behind the ladies of lunch—“vegetable chili on her head.”

A voice came from beside her. “Turkey tetrazzini would be better.”

Cassie spun around. It was Lila, grinning at her. “Or mac and cheese, alphabet soup, sloppy joes. But it’s not worth it. You’ll just get detention.”

“She’s so awful,” said Cassie. She brightened. Maybe Lila’s wish was to get even with Annabel. But how could that possibly be a good wish?

“Yeah, and the worst part is she has all the teachers fooled,” said Lila. “She’s been the Student of the Month three times in a row.”

Cassie felt her face get warm. “That’s so unfair,” she said.

“Tell me about it, sister,” said Lila. “Now let’s get some lunch. You can sit at my table. Just keep that chili to yourself, please.”



Cassie got in line behind Lila and took a closer look at the cafeteria. It was just as bad as Sage had said—smelly, uncomfortably warm, and filled with lots of unidentifiable food you were expected to eat.

"Do you wish to get even with Annabel?" she asked Lila.

Lila shrugged. "I wouldn't waste a wish on that. I save my wishes for important things."

Aha! thought Cassie. She grabbed a tray and a bowl of the chili. She followed Lila to a table in the back of the cafeteria, close to the windows. They had a lovely mountain view, though it wasn't quite as spectacular as the Crystal Mountains.

One by one they were joined by other girls and a couple of boys, Lila's friends. Lila introduced her to them all, and Cassie recognized several of them from room 261. They seemed like a nice bunch of kids. Cassie dug in to her chili, which was actually not inedible.

Lila told the group the story from that morning. She was a great storyteller, and even her friends from class laughed as if they were hearing it for the first time.

"So why *were* you late this morning?" Cassie asked. Lila made a sad face and said, "It's so hard, Cassie, you wouldn't believe it if I told you. It's just so terrible. My mother…"

Cassie leaned forward, almost placing her chin in her pudding cup. "Yes," she breathed. She was *this close* to finding out Lila's wish; she was sure of it.

"My mother"—her voice cracked—"forgot to set the alarm last night!"

Her friends all burst into laughter. "I hate it when that happens!" a blond girl cried.

Cassie tried again. "I see your teeth are silver. Do you wish they were white?" But that got a laugh from Lila.

"You don't like my braces?" she said, baring her teeth. "Well, neither do I, but they're coming off soon."

Cassie tried again. She looked out the window at the driving rain. "Perhaps you wish for this rain to end?"

"No way," said Lila. "It's good for the plants."

She leaned back and looked at Cassie. "You ask some crazy questions, new girl," she said. "How about this one? What do you call cheese that isn't yours?"

"I have no idea," Cassie replied.

“Nacho cheese!” said Lila.

Cassie didn’t get it, though the rest of the students at the table howled with laughter. “Oh,” said Cassie. Another joke. She was beginning to realize that it was going to be very difficult to get Lila to be serious. How was she ever going to get the truth out of her? Just before classes began, Cassie stood up from the table and dumped her tray. She was really starting to worry and needed a moment to think, so she headed to the girls’ bathroom, where she stood in front of the mirror, staring at her pale, non-sparkling reflection in the mirror. Was it time to use her underwhelming Mirror Mantra already? She pulled out her Star-Zap instead and accessed her Countdown Clock. She looked at the time remaining and gasped. It had to be broken! Could she really only have twenty-seven hours left to make Lila’s wish come true? Was that even possible? Even for someone as determined and talented as she was, this was going to be tight.



There were no other clues for Cassie for the rest of the afternoon. And as the time came to pack up their bags, Cassie was in a bit of a panic. She couldn’t let Lila out of her sight; she had to be sure to stick to her like sparkleglue for the rest of the day—and somehow wrangle an invitation to stay at her house overnight. That way she’d get extra time with her. *And I also won’t have to sleep in an invisible tent in this weather,* thought Cassie. While she was pretty sure the tent was waterproof and would be warm and toasty inside, she didn’t want to take any chances.

The bell rang for the end of the day and Cassie pushed into the hallway, determined not to lose sight of Lila. Luckily, the girl’s locker was only a couple away from hers.

“Good first day?” Lila asked, unzipping her backpack.

“It was good,” said Cassie. She decided to plunge right in. “So, um, do you want to hang out after school? Do homework together?”

“Can’t,” said Lila. “After-school club. Ice-dating.” Or at least that was what Cassie thought she said. Her words were muffled by the arrival of a noisy bunch of kids who opened the lockers that stood between them. Cassie quickly grabbed her things, but by the time she slammed her locker shut, Lila was gone. Cassie felt her heart beat faster and her pulse race. She had to find Lila immediately.

Ice-dating? What could that be? She turned to the girl next to her, who was staring into a mirror on the inside of the top of her locker, putting a glossy-looking substance from a tube on her lips. It smelled a bit like starberries to Cassie.

"I need to find the ice-dating club," she said.

"Ice-dating?" said the girl. "What in the world are you talking about?" Then she thought for a moment and laughed. "You mean ice-skating! Yeah, the rink is right at the bottom of the hill. Go out the front door of the school and make a left. You can't miss it."

Cassie thanked her and took off down the hall.

"It's pretty cold in there," the girl called out after her. "Don't forget your gloves!"

On the run, Cassie accessed her Wishworld Outfit Selector and made her choice. She waved her mittened hand at the girl and ran out of the school as fast as she could, whipping right past Annabel. "No running in the halls!" Annabel yelled after Cassie. "Do you hear me, new girl? Do you want a detention?"



Cassie pushed open the door to the ice rink. The girl had been right; it was just as cold inside as it was out. The room was huge, and a large shiny white oval stood in the middle. After some searching, Cassie found a group of students sitting on a bench, taking off their shoes. "Hey, Cassie!" said Lila with a smile. "I didn't know you were joining the ice-skating club. That's so cool!" Then she laughed at her accidental joke.

"I am!" said Cassie.

Lila introduced her to the club moderator, a teacher named Mr. Thompson. He told Cassie to take off her shoes and go get a pair of skates.

"What size?" asked the bored-looking boy behind the counter.

"One thirty-seven G," said Cassie, giving her Starland size without thinking.

The boy's eyes nearly bugged out of his head. He stared at Cassie for a minute, then grabbed her boot off the counter and turned it over. "Size five," he said, shaking his head. "Everyone's a comedian."

It took a while for Cassie to force her feet into the stiff white boots and even longer to lace them up. She stood up and quickly realized how hard it

was to balance on the thin metal blades as her legs bowed first in, then out. She took a few shaky steps toward the rink, where Lila was already zipping around. A few more and she was clutching the rink wall for support. *Whew!* She made it to the entrance. The rink was a vast, intimidating expanse of white, not a sparkle in sight. Gingerly, Cassie placed one foot on the ice, then the other. She was standing! She pushed forward confidently. While she had never skated before, she was sure that with her inherent nimbleness and ability to master new things, she'd be a natural on the ice. She glided forward and…*whoosh!* Within an instant she was flat on her back, looking up at the rafters. *This is the second time I've fallen since I arrived on Wishworld,* she thought. *Must be a record.*

Cassie put her hands to the ice and struggled to her feet, happy she was wearing mittens. *Moons and stars!* she thought. *This Wish Mission is more dangerous than I thought.* She somehow managed to make it to the waist-high wall that ran around the rink, and she slowly circled the rink with short, choppy steps, her hand in an iron grip on the railing. Any time she tried to let go of it, she lost her balance. She started to get hot, sweaty, and annoyed. She could see Lila zooming around the ice with her hands behind her back, then skating backward and even doing some spins. Cassie was impressed by how graceful she was.

Lila swooped toward Cassie, then turned away and sharply doubled back, sliding to a quick stop in front of her. Cassie was so startled she lost her balance. Luckily, Lila reached out a red-gloved hand and grabbed her arm in time.

"I'm sorry," Lila said. "The ice is slippery, isn't it?"

Cassie scowled at her.

"I'm not joking," she said. "It's not easy. You've got to take it slow, and pay attention. And practice."

Then, Cassie's hand firmly in hers, Lila showed her how to keep her knees bent, which dramatically improved Cassie's balance. She began to relax, a tiny bit.

"Take little steps," said Lila. "There you go. It's all about keeping your ankles steady."

Cassie wobbled forward.

"And if you think you're going to fall, make your hands into fists," she suggested. "Don't want to lose a finger under a sharp blade!"

Lila next taught Cassie how to push off and glide. And before Cassie knew it, she had navigated one full turn around the ice without falling. At the end of the hour, the girls were laughing and joking. Cassie had made it three times around the rink without falling.

She really is kind and helpful, thought Cassie. *But unfortunately I still have no idea what her wish could be.*

After the girls left the ice and had returned their skates, they put on their boots and stood outside waiting for Lila to be picked up.

"Who are you waiting for?" Cassie asked.

"My dad," said Lila.

Cassie had an idea. She hoped it would work. "Um…maybe you could come to my house tonight for dinner. My mom's making…" she searched her memory for a Wishling dinner option. "Grilled cheese pizza burgers" was what she came up with.

Lila burst out laughing. "I'd love to find out exactly what that is, but my dad is on his way to get me."

"Oh, that's too bad," said Cassie sadly. Would Lila take the bait?

She did. "Hey, why don't you come to my house for dinner instead? And sleep over, too?" she suggested. "Maybe you can have grilled cheese pizza burgers another night."

"Okay!" said Cassie quickly. Her plan had worked!



"What would you girls like to drink with dinner?" Lila's mother asked. She had the same black hair and easy grin as her daughter.

"Sparkling water for me," said Lila.

Cassie's eyes lit up. "Oh, yes, for me, too!" she exclaimed. Why hadn't she heard about this delightful beverage in Wishers 101? It would be a tiny reminder of home. She was missing the colors and the sparkle of Starland. It really helped to keep your spirits up, she realized. Her non-glittery surroundings were starting to get her down.

Lila's mom returned with two glasses of clear liquid, which she set on the table. A few bubbles rose to the top of each glass and popped joylessly on the surface. Cassie looked at Lila. That was it? "Um, I thought you said sparkling water," she said.

"This is sparkling water," replied Lila, taking a sip.

Cassie stared at the glass. “So where are the sparkles?” she asked.

Lila laughed. “Oh, Cassie, you crack me up!”

After dinner there were chocolate ice cream sundaes for dessert, which were startastic. But even more wonderful was that Cassie finally figured out Lila’s wish.

Once the table was cleared, Cassie and Lila spread out their books on the dining room table and did their homework together. Cassie did her reading comprehension homework, reading a long passage and then answering ten multiple choice questions, and her science assignment, then dawdled over the math homework, trying to look like a normal Wishling who couldn’t add, subtract, divide, and multiply huge sums instantly in her head. She stole a glance over at Lila’s math book. She was pleasantly surprised to see that every answer was correct.

“Hey, you’re good at math!” Cassie said admiringly.

“I am,” said Lila. “Very good.”

Cassie next leaned over to take a look at Lila’s reading comprehension answers.

“Um,” Cassie began, not sure how to broach the subject “You might want to take another look at those first…um…ten answers,” she said.

Lila sucked in her cheeks and looked for a moment like she might cry. Then she glared at Cassie and slammed the book shut. “It’s fine,” she said tersely.

“But…” began Cassie.

“Just leave me alone, all right,” Lila said. She stormed off and Cassie was left sitting at the dining room table by herself. She could hear Lila stomping up the stairs.

Well, this is awkward, she thought.

After giving the girl a couple of minutes to cool down, Cassie walked up the stairs, which creaked under her feet. After first opening the doors to two closets and a bathroom, she spotted a door with a sign on it that said LILA’S ROOM.

She grinned. “I’m a regular Detective Marmaduke Carbuncle,” she said to herself. She took a deep breath and knocked on Lila’s door.

“Come in,” said a muffled voice.

Cassie opened the door. Lila was lying on her bed, her face buried in a pillow.

Cassie sat gingerly on the edge of the bed. “Do you want to talk?” she said.

With a heavy sigh, Lila flipped over on her back and stared at the ceiling, unable to make eye contact with Cassie.

“So now you know,” she said. “I’m great at math but I’m terrible at reading,” she said. “It’s so humiliating. Ms. Olds must think I’m so dumb.”

Cassie felt a sudden tingly rush of energy. She shivered with excitement. “You wish Ms. Olds would appreciate you,” she said, her eyes shining.

Lila sat up, clutching the pillow to her chest. “I want her to like me,” she said. “So to get her attention, I try to make her laugh. But she ends up getting mad at me.” She sighed. “Meanwhile, people like Annabel Victor get all the attention. It’s not fair.”

“Well, I have a suggestion,” said Cassie. “Save the jokes for lunch and recess. Just be your smart, kind, helpful self during the school day. Like when you helped me today at the ice rink. Ms. Olds is sure to notice and appreciate you.”

Lila got a hopeful look on her face. “You really think so?”

“I do,” replied Cassie. “And here’s another thing. I’m pretty good at reading. I can give you some tips to help with this reading comprehension stuff. You might never be as good at it as math, but you could get better,” she told her. “It’s kind of like ice skating. Take it slow. Pay attention. Practice, practice, practice. Use a dictionary when you get to words you don’t know.” She laughed. “Okay, that’s not like ice skating, but you catch my gift.”

“I catch your *drift*,” corrected Lila.

“See, you’re paying attention already,” said Cassie. Though she thought her way made more sense.

The two girls got ready for bed.

Before Lila drifted off to sleep she asked, “Do you really think this plan to impress Ms. Olds is going to work?”

“I’m sure of it,” Cassie said confidently. *With me on the case,* she thought, *how could it* not *work?*

CHAPTER 11

They had pancakes for breakfast the next morning. They looked just like starcakes to Cassie, only round. They tasted pretty similar, too. Cassie tried maple syrup for the first time and nearly poured the whole container onto her plate, it was so delicious. *Tessa would love this on her starberry waffles,* she thought.

"Do you remember the plan?" she asked Lila. "Plenty of participation, kindness, and generosity. Today and every day. There are much more positive ways of getting attention from your teacher."

Lila bit her lip. "I'm a little nervous!"

"No need to be nervous," said Cassie. "Just be yourself." Then she hastily added, "Maybe without quite as many jokes, of course!"

Lila held her glass of orange juice up to Cassie. "To participation, kindness, generosity, and no jokes," she said. Cassie stared at her blankly. "Pick up your glass," instructed Lila. "Let's make a toast!" Cassie held her juice aloft and Lila clinked hers against it. And Cassie made another Wishworld observation: *"Toast" has more than one meaning on Wishworld!*



There was just one problem with the plan—Annabel. Cassie knew that they only had six hours left to make Lila's wish come true and the girl thwarted them at every turn. When Lila patiently raised her hand to answer a difficult math problem, Annabel shouted out the answer. When Ms. Olds walked into the classroom with a big stack of books in her arms, and Lila raced to the front of the room to help her, Annabel leaned over and give Lila a little push so she accidentally knocked the books to the floor. Annabel then made a big show out of helping the teacher pick them up. And Cassie stewed when Ms. Olds gave Annabel a grateful smile.

"Class, please pass your homework forward," Ms. Olds said. Everyone reached into their folders and handed their work to the person in front of them. Ms. Olds collected the sheets from the first person in each row and stacked them together. She flipped through the pages at her desk. "Lila, I don't see yours, did you forget to hand it in?" she asked.

Lila looked up, confused. "No," she said. "I handed it in."

Ms. Olds looked again. "I don't see it here," she said.

Lila looked at Cassie nervously. Then instinct must have kicked in. To Cassie's dismay she started to say, "Hey, Ms. Olds, would you get mad if…"

Cassie knew what was coming next. She shook her head at Lila. *No jokes!* she thought. Not realizing exactly what she was doing, she willed Lila's voice to lower in volume. And that's exactly what happened. Lila's mouth was moving, but no sound was coming out.

Wow, thought Cassie. I guess I found my secret talent. She practiced on the next student who raised her hand.

"Ms. Olds, may I please be excused?" the girl said, her voice increasing in volume with each word. She looked surprised.

Cassie stared daggers at Annabel, who was sitting primly at her desk, her hands clasped together. She knew the girl had to be the one who took Lila's homework. She pretended to be one thing, but was actually quite just the opposite. And she had all the grown-ups fooled.



The bell rang for lunch. Lila shook her head as she walked out of the classroom with Cassie. "Well, that didn't go so well," she said. "And what do you think happened to my homework?"

But then Lila caught a look at Cassie's disappointed face. "Come on," she said, trying to cheer Cassie up. "No need to look so upset. It's no big deal."

Cassie's Countdown Clock told her differently. She was running out of time. It really *was* a big deal. Cassie waved Lila off. "I'll see you in the cafeteria," she said. She looked around grumpily. Where was Ms. Olds now to see how sweet and understanding Lila was? But the hallway was empty. She looked again. Oh, no, it wasn't. There, across the hall, staring back at her, was Scarlet. She was still sparkly (at least to Cassie) but she was wearing leggings and a large black sweater that looked like it had been eaten by moonmoths over a bright pink shirt that peeked through all the holes. Her hair was almost entirely black (with pink bangs). But it was Scarlet just the same. And Cassie knew exactly what that meant.

"I know, I know," said Cassie, shaking her head. "My wish is in serious trouble."

"So what's going on?" asked Scarlet. "Lady Stella is really worried. You know you're running out of time on the Countdown Clock, right?"

Cassie told Scarlet the whole story.

"Oh, that Annabel sounds awful," said Scarlet. "So what are we going to do?"

"We have to figure out a way to help Lila look good in front of Ms. Olds," said Cassie. "Before the end of the school day, which is when the Countdown Clock will run out."

"Well, you'd better figure it out fast," said Scarlet.

Cassie thought for a moment. "Can you go down to the principal's office and tell her you're the new girl in class 261?"

Scarlet nodded. "And then what?"

Cassie shrugged. "And then she'll bring you upstairs and then…" her voice trailed off. "And then we'll figure something out."

"Okay," said Scarlet. She skipped down the hallway, then stopped and looked back. "I hope you know what you are doing," she said.

Cassie smiled and waved. She'd figure it out. She was sure of it.



"You never came to lunch," said Lila, when she found Cassie standing in the hallway outside of the classroom. "You must be hungry. I brought you a

snack." She handed Cassie a bag of some odd-looking twisty brown things. "Thank you," said Cassie eagerly, tearing open the bag. She was hungry. "So can you continue to not tell jokes in class?" she asked.

Lila stared at the floor. "It's hard," she said.

"Tell me a joke," said Cassie. "Get it out of your system!"

Lila looked up. "Why was the math book sad?" she asked.

"I don't know," said Cassie "Why?"

Lila grinned. "Because it had so many problems," she said.

The two girls laughed. Then Lila grew serious. "Cassie, I don't know if this is going to work. I don't think Ms. Olds is ever going to take me seriously as a student."

"Hey, would you humor me for a minute?' asked Cassie.

Lila nodded.

Cassie grabbed her hand. "Sometimes when I need strength and reassurance, I say these words out loud. It just makes me feel better and gives me focus." And then, even though she was not particularly fond of her mantra, she said it out loud: "Listen to your feelings. Let your inner light sparkle." A tingle ran through Cassie. Lila must have felt it, too, because her eyes widened. "Wow," she said. "I *do* feel better."

Annabel came bustling over to them. "No eating in the hallway," she said. She grabbed the pretzels from Cassie's hand and tossed them into the trash.

"I was hungry," said Cassie. "And that was mean. I'm…I'm going to tell Ms. Olds."

"Like she's really going to believe you over me, three-time Student of the Month?" Annabel scoffed. She turned to Lila and gave her a cruel smile. "What ever happened to your homework?" she asked.

"I bet I can guess," said Lila.

"You'll never prove it," answered Annabel.

With a sigh, Cassie and Lila headed into the classroom. Cassie had no idea what she was going to do when Scarlet arrived. But still, she was certain it was going to be good.

CHAPTER 12

Scarlet stood in front of the class, doing her best to look like a new Wishling student. She looked at her feet and smiled shyly when the principal introduced her to Ms. Olds, who remarked (again) that she smelled deep-dish blueberry pie. Scarlet gave Cassie a look which plainly said "So, what do we do now?" Cassie was still not sure, so she shrugged. They'd have to play it by year, a new Wishling expression she had picked up on her mission. She assumed that meant they would make it up as they went along.

"Ms. Olds," said Principal McIlhenney, "will you join me outside for a moment?"

"Certainly," said Ms. Olds. "Scarlet, please take the seat next to Annabel for today." She smiled. "Annabel, I'm sure you'll do your best to make our newest student feel welcome."

As soon as the adults stepped into the hallway, Scarlet skipped across the room to her seat. Cassie watched as Annabel's eyes lit up. Annabel turned to Scarlet, a mocking look on her face. Suddenly, Cassie knew exactly what to do. She concentrated, dialing up the volume. She just hoped it would be loud enough for the adults to hear.

"Did you just skip?" Annabel said mockingly. "What, are we in preschool?" Her amplified voice echoed in the classroom, but her eyes were

flashing and she didn't seem to notice.

Scarlet stopped in her tracks. "Are you talking to me?" she said.

"Yes, I'm talking to you," Annabel replied. "Skipping like a baby."

Scarlet honestly looked confused. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I would never *skip*," she said hotly. "I was hurrying."

Annabel laughed. "Oh, yes you were. And those clothes. Did you get that sweater at a garage sale or something? I mean, really."

Scarlet was staring daggers at Annabel, looking like she was about to start yelling at her. Then someone spoke up. It was Lila.

"Enough," she said, standing and walking up the aisle. "Leave the poor girl alone."

"Poor girl?" said Scarlet, clearly puzzled.

"Ms. Olds asked you to welcome Scarlet into our classroom," she said, two spots of pink in her cheeks. Noticing her voice was extra loud, she tried to lower it. But Cassie turned up the volume as loud as she could. "We are supposed to treat our classmates with respect. Be kind to them. And you did neither. You were just plain mean." She turned to Scarlet. "Welcome to our class, Scarlet. We're not all like Annabel," she said. "Actually, we're all pretty nice. I think you're going to like it here."

Just then there was the sound of clapping. Cassie spun around to look at the doorway. And there she saw Ms. Olds and Principal McIlhenney, applauding Lila.

"Nicely done, Lila," said Ms. Olds. "You are a wonderful example of a good citizen and supportive classmate." She turned to Annabel and shook her head. "And Annabel, I am shocked, simply shocked, by your behavior toward our newest student. It is simply unacceptable."

Annabel stared down at her desk in a furious silence. Cassie got the idea that her mean girl days were over.

The principal was beaming. "Lila, your behavior was a great example for the rest of the students. Exactly the way our new Student of the Month should act."

Lila nodded and smiled. "Lila," said Cassie. "Principal McIlhenney just said that you're the Student of the Month!"

"What?" said Lila with a gasp. "Are you serious? Me?"

The principal nodded. "Congratulations!"

The class, everyone except for Annabel that is, cheered.

“Student of the Month,” Lila said to herself. “I can’t believe it.” Everyone could see the joy on her face, but only Cassie and Scarlet could see the glimmering rainbow waves of pure wish energy that arced through the air. Cassie almost ducked when they flew right at her face, but then she stood still as they were absorbed by her star-shaped glasses. She closed her eyes and felt the warmth and positive feelings flow through her.

When the bell rang for the end of the day, Lila rushed up to Cassie and hugged her so tightly she lifted her off the ground. “Thank you, Cassie!” she said, her eyes shining. Cassie hugged her back, which she knew would erase Lila’s—and everyone’s—memory of her visit.

When they broke apart, Lila had a strange, distant look on her face. She blinked and then walked out of the classroom, not turning back. They hadn’t even had a chance to say good-bye. And Cassie, with a large lump in her throat, thought it was better that way.

Epilogue

“Star salutations,” said Cassie as she walked into Lady Stella’s office and was immediately surrounded by her fellow Star Darlings, all eager to congratulate her. “It wasn’t easy, but I ended up doing a startacular job, if I do say so myself,” she said.

Scarlet cleared her throat. “And?”

Cassie clapped Scarlet on the back, hoping she looked modest and generous as she did so. “Oh, yes, and of course Scarlet was really just so helpful to me. Star salutations, Scarlet.”

Scarlet nodded. “You’re welcome,” she said. Then she smiled. “That was a pretty crazy mission. Why that girl accused me of skipping, I’ll never know.”

Everyone took their seats around Lady Stella’s silver table, but Cassie stayed standing, knowing what was about to happen. Lady Stella handed the Wish Orb to Cassie. Cassie felt a lump in her throat as she stared at the beautiful glowing ball of light. Then she gasped as it began to transform into a silverbella, its round blossom a cluster of tiny stars shining with moonglow. She stared at it for a moment, transfixed. Then the stars parted to reveal a stunning cluster of pale pink jewels—a lunalite, Cassie’s Power Crystal.

“Oh,” she breathed. “It’s the most beautiful Power Crystal of them all.”

“It is lovely,” said Lady Stella. “But they’re all beautiful, Cassie.”

Cassie looked up and gave the headmistress a wink. *As if!* She turned to her fellow Star Darlings, who, she felt, all seemed to be waiting for her to

say a few words. “My fellow Star Darlings,” she began. “Although my mission was most probably the best one of all so far—no offense to the rest of you—I want to tell you that success did not come as easily to me as you may imagine. I think I can be a shining example to you all as I persevered __”

“Star salutations, Cassie,” interrupted Lady Stella. “But I think we’re done here.” She was staring at her, Cassie imagined, with great admiration. After all, Cassie had taken the headmistress’s words to heart. She had turned her fear into total confidence. And just in time for her mission, too.



Cassie stayed behind to chat a bit with Lady Stella, who kept asking her if she was okay. She was fine, she said. She was startastic. What was the problem?

When she got back to her room, she placed her hand on the palm scanner. “Welcome back, Cassie,” said the Bot-Bot voice. “And good job!”

“Star salutations,” she said distractedly.

Her room was filled with Star Darlings. Astra was bouncing her star ball against the wall. Tessa was braiding Gemma’s hair. Adora was browsing through Cassie’s huge collection of holo-books. Libby was sleeping on her window seat.

“Star greetings, everyone,” said Cassie. “And star salutations for coming here today. I have some important things to discuss with you, my fellow Star Darlings. As you know, I am a very sensitive and thoughtful individual. I often see things that many of you might miss. As a matter of fact…”

“Get to the point!” someone called out.

“Fine,” said Cassie. “I called you all here because something weird is going on at Starling Academy. And it involves us, the Star Darlings. I told Vega I would wait until I had proof, and now I think I do.”

“What is it?” asked Leona. “Does it have to do with my messed-up mission?”

“And Scarlet being kicked out of the Star Darlings?” asked Astra.

“Yes,” said Cassie. “There are a lot of weird things going on around campus, and I think the clues all lead to one individual.”

“Who?” said Leona.

“Yes, tell us!” Astra shouted.

“Ophelia,” said Cassie.

“I knew it!” Scarlet shouted.

“Something just isn’t right,” said Cassie. “She talks about her mom in the present tense. She’s an orphan but she gets care packages. How could she have been admitted to Starling Academy if she was so clueless? Something is off with her. I don’t think she’s an orphan and I don’t think she’s clueless at all. I didn’t put it all together until my Wish Mission. I met a girl who was pretending to be something she wasn’t. I think Ophelia is doing the same thing.”

“Well, I don’t believe it,” said Leona stubbornly. “I think you are being unfair. I’m going to her room right now to straighten this out once and for all.”

“I’m coming with you,” said Scarlet, scrambling to her feet.

But Leona continued to sit on the bed. After a few moments, Scarlet grabbed her hand and dragged her out the door. The rest of the Star Darlings (save the still napping Libby) were close behind.

They hopped on the Cosmic Transporter, everyone tensely silent, and made their way to Ophelia’s new room. Leona knocked and knocked on the door. There was no answer.

“Ophelia!” she called. “It’s Leona.” She turned to Cassie, her face flushed golden. “I asked you to look out for her, not investigate her!”

There was no answer. Finally, Scarlet skipped off to get a Bot-Bot guard. When they told it that they were worried about Ophelia, it finally relented and opened the door for them.

Leona barged into the room first and let out a gasp.

“What’s wrong?” Cassie shouted, pushing her way inside. She looked around, bewildered. Ophelia was gone. The room was empty. There was not a thing in it. It was as if no one had ever lived there.

But on the wall, in hastily scribbled yellow letters, were the words *I’M SORRY*.

“This is terrible,” Gemma said.

“You can say that again,” said Cassie.

“This is terrible,” Gemma repeated.

And then nobody said anything else, because they were plunged into a sudden and total darkness. For the first time in Starland history, the lights had gone out.

Glossary

Aeropuff: A Starland dessert.

Afterglow: The Starling afterlife. When Starlings die, it is said that they have "begun their afterglow."

Age of Fulfillment: The age at which a Starling is considered mature enough to begin to study wish granting.

Astromuffins: Baked breakfast treat.

Bad Wish Orbs: Orbs that are the result of bad or selfish wishes made on Wishworld. These grow dark and warped and are quickly sent to the Negative Energy Facility.

Ballum blossom tree: A Starland tree with cherry blossom–like flowers that light up at night.

Big Dipper Dormitory: Where third- and fourth-year students live.

Bloombug: A purple-and-pink-spotted bug that goes wild during the full moon in warm weather.

Bluebeezel: Delicate bright blue flowers that emit a scent that only glitterbees can detect.

Bluebubble: Vega's Wish Blossom. Deep blue gives way to icy blue in the petals of this compact illuminated flower. Glowing points of light illuminate the blossom. Its petals open and close with such regularity that you can use it to tell time.

Boingtree: A shrublike tree with tickly aromatic needles.

Boingtree gum: Starland chewing gum.

Bot-Bot: A Starland robot. There are Bot-Bot guards, waiters, deliverers, and guides on Starland.

Bright Day: The date a Starling is born, celebrated each year like a Wishling birthday.

Calliope: A glittery yellow flower with ruffly petals and a magenta center.

Callistola: A tiny green bell-like flower that emits a faint tinkling sound when shaken. They smell a lot like ripe ozziefruit.

Celestial Café: Starling Academy's outstanding cafeteria.

Cloudcandy: Name for various Starland confections.

Cocomoon: A sweet and creamy fruit with an iridescent glow.

Cosmic Transporter: The moving sidewalk system that transports students through dorms and across the Starling Academy campus.

Countdown Clock: A timing device on a Starling's Star-Zap. It lets them know how much time is left on a Wish Mission, which coincides with when the Wish Orb will fade.

Crystal Mountains: The most beautiful mountains on Starland. They are located across the lake from Starling Academy.

Cyber Journal: Where the Star Darlings record their Wishworld observations.

Cycle of Life: A Starling's life span. When Starlings die, they are said to have "completed their Cycle of Life."

Dododay: The third day of the starweek. The days in order are Sweetday, Shineday, Dododay, Yumday, Lunaday, Bopday, Reliquaday, and Babsday. (Starlandians have a three-day weekend every starweek.)

Double starweek: Sixteen stardays.

Drifting moonbug: A storytelling device meant to mislead the reader. Starland's version of a red herring.

Druderwomp: An edible barrel-like bush capable of pulling up its own roots and rolling like a tumbleweed, then planting itself again.

Featherwhisper: A Starland dessert.

Flash Vertical Mover: A mode of transportation similar to a Wishling elevator, only superfast.

Floating Wisp: A Starland dessert.

Floozel: The Starland equivalent of a Wishworld mile.

Florafierce: Glowing stardust rises from the middle of this flower's fiery-red petals.

Flutterfocus: A Starland creature similar to a Wishworld butterfly but with illuminated wings.

Galliope: A sparkly Starland creature similar to a Wishworld horse.

Garble greens: A Starland vegetable similar to spinach.

Glion: A gentle Starland creature similar in appearance to a Wishworld lion, but with a multicolored glowing mane.

Glitterbees: Blue-and-orange-striped bugs that pollinate Starland flowers and produce a sweet substance called gossamer.

Globerbeem: Large, friendly lightning bug–type insects that are sparkly and lay eggs.

Glorange: A glowing orange fruit. Its juice is often enjoyed at breakfast time.

Glowfur: A small, furry Starland creature with gossamer wings that eats flowers and glows.

Glowin' Glions: Starling Academy's champion E-ball team.

Glowsow: A large farm animal that is prized for the light it emits at night—perfect for working after dark.

Good Wish Orbs: Orbs that are the result of positive wishes made on Wishworld. They are planted in Wish-Houses.

Gossamer: A sweet and fragrant liquid made by glitterbees; often used in baking.

Gossamerwisp: A Starland dessert.

Green Globules: Green pellets that are fed to pet glowfurs. They don't taste very good to Starlings.

Half-moon pie: A Starland dessert.

Halo Hall: The building where Starling Academy classes are held.

Halo-harp: A melodious stringed instrument played by striking its strings with a small mallet.

Holo–diary: A holographic book used for jotting down thoughts and feelings. There are also holo-billboards, holo-cameras, holo-letters, holo-journals, holo-cards, holo-communications, holo-flyers, holo-texts, holo-videos, and holo-pictures. Anything that would be made of paper on Wishworld is a hologram on Starland.

Holo-dice: A holographic version of dice.

Holo-phone: A Starland game much like the Wishworld "Telephone" where a phrase is passed on from one Starling to another and the last Starling says

it out loud. The final message is often markedly different from the initial one, much to everyone's amusement.

Holo-text: A message sent or received on a Star-Zap and projected into the air.

Hydrong: The equivalent of a Wishworld hundred.

Illuminated Manuscript Technology: Also known as IMT, a new technology allowing a reader to view the action in a holo-book as the book is read aloud.

Illumination Library: The impressive library at Starling Academy.

Impossible Wish Orbs: Orbs that are the result of wishes made on Wishworld that are beyond the power of Starlings to grant.

Isle of Misera: A barren rocky island off the coast of New Prism.

Jujufruit: A large purple fruit with thick skin and juicy flesh. It is bouncy and sometimes used as a ball before being peeled and eaten.

Kaleidoscope City: Where Vega is from. Its colorful downtown is a tourist destination. A factory town, it is well known for its metal production. Its motto is "If it's made right, it's made in Kaleidoscope City."

Kaleidoscope tree: A rare and beautiful tree whose blossoms continuously change color.

Keytar: An instrument that is held like a guitar but has keys instead of strings.

Lallabelles: Tiny turqoiuse flowers that grow in clusters. They do not fade and are often used in dried flower arrangements.

Lightning Lounge: A place on the Starling Academy campus where students relax and socialize.

Little Dipper Dormitory: Where first- and second-year students live.

Luminous Lake: A serene and lovely lake next to the Starling Academy campus.

Meepletile: A Starland creature closest in nature to a Wishworld reptile. It frequently sheds its skin.

Microjoule: A tiny amount.

Mirror Mantra: A saying specific to each Star Darling that when recited gives her (and her Wisher) reassurance and strength. When a Starling recites

her Mirror Mantra while looking in a mirror, she will see her true appearance reflected.

Mooncheese: A mild, tasty cheese often melted in sandwiches. It is made from the milk of the moonnut tree.

Moonfeather: A common material used for stuffing pillows, coats, and toys. Moonfeathers are harvested from the moonfeather bush.

Moonium: An amount similar to a Wishworld million.

Moonmoth: Large glowing creatures attracted to light like Wishworld moths.

Moonshot: A very slight possibility.

Noddlenoodle: An extremely long, thin noodle often used in Starling soups. A single noodle can fill an entire bowl.

Old Prism: A medium-sized historical city about an hour from Starling Academy.

Ozziefruit: Sweet plum-sized indigo fruit that grows on pink-leaved trees. It is usually eaten raw, made into jam, or cooked into pies. Starling Academy has an ozziefruit orchard.

Power Crystal: The powerful stone that each Star Darling receives once she has granted her first wish.

Purple piphany: A Starland flower with a distinctive fragrance.

Queezle: Vega's Power Crystal. Sparkling crystalline blue nuggets held together by their own internal magnetic force. Their seemingly chaotic arrangement actually represents a precise mathematical equation.

Roxylinda: A coral-colored flower with a large blossom.

Safety starglasses: Worn by Starlings to protect their eyes when they are close to a shooting star.

Serenity Gardens: Extensive botanical gardens set on an island in Luminous Lake.

Shimmering Shores: The sparkly beach located on the banks of Luminous Lake.

Shooting stars: Speeding stars that Starlings can latch on to and ride to Wishworld.

Shortsnip: A tiny unit of measurement, generally referring to distance.

Silverbella: An orb-shaped Starland flower with tiny pink and white petals that radiate from its center.

Silver Blossom: The final manifestation of a Good Wish Orb. This glimmering metallic bloom is placed in the Hall of Granted Wishes.

Solar metal: A common, inexpensive kind of metal.

Solar Springs: A hilly small town in the countryside where Tessa and Gemma are from.

Sparkle Meal: A premade meal.

Sparkle-O's: A sweet, fruity cereal, not usually considered a healthy breakfast.

Sparkle shower: An energy shower Starlings take every day to get clean and refresh their sparkling glow.

Spill the stars: To tell someone everything.

Star ball: An intramural sport that shares similarities with soccer on Wishworld. But star ball players use energy manipulation to control the ball.

Starbounce: Starland's version of a trampoline.

Starcake: A star-shaped Starling breakfast item, similar to a Wishworld pancake.

Starcar: The primary mode of transportation for most Starlings. These ultrasafe vehicles drive themselves on cushions of wish energy.

Star Caves: The caverns underneath Starling Academy where the Star Darlings' secret Wish Cavern is located.

Starf!: A Starling expression of dismay.

Star flash: News bulletin, often used starcastically.

Starland: The irregularly shaped world where Starlings live. It is veiled by a bright yellow glow that from a distance makes it look like a star.

Starland City: The largest city on Starland, also its capital.

Starlicious: Tasty, delicious.

Starlight: An expression used to mean "public attention." When all eyes are on a Starling, she is said to be "in the starlight."

Starling Academy: The most prestigious all-girl four-year boarding school for wish granting on Starland.

Starlings: The glowing beings with sparkly skin who live on Starland.

Starmarble: An attractive stone used for surfaces in Starland architecture.

Starmin: Sixty starsecs (or seconds) on Starland; the equivalent of a Wishworld minute.

Starpillows: A Starland dessert.

Star Quad: The center of the Starling Academy campus. The dancing fountain, band shell, and hedge maze are located there.

Starriest: As in "I don't have the starriest idea." Used to express lack of knowledge or understanding.

Star salutations: The Starling way to say "thank you."

Starsec: A brief period of time, similar to a Wishworld second.

Star Wranglers: Starlings whose job is to lasso a shooting star, to transport Starlings to Wishworld.

Staryear: A period of 365 days on Starland, the equivalent of a Wishworld year.

Star-Zap: The ultimate smartphone that Starlings use for all communications. It has myriad features.

Stellar School: A rival of Starling Academy in star ball.

Stellation: The point of a star. Halo Hall has five stellations, each housing a different department.

Supernova: A stellar explosion. Also used colloquially, meaning "really angry," as in "She went supernova when she found out the bad news."

Time of Applying: The very busy time of year when Starlings work on and send out applications to schools.

Time of Letting Go: One of the four seasons on Starland. It falls between the warmest season and the coldest, similar to fall on Wishworld.

Time of Lumiere: The warmest season on Starland, similar to summer on Wishworld.

Time of New Beginnings: Similar to spring on Wishworld, this is the season that follows the coldest time of year; it's when plants and trees come into bloom.

Time of Shadows: The coldest season of the year on Starland, similar to winter on Wishworld.

Toothlight: A high-tech gadget that Starlings use to clean their teeth.

Violina: A pale blue cone-shaped flower with clusters of shiny dark blue leaves.

Wharfle: A round metal disk used for Winkedly Wharfles, a game similar to tiddlywinks in which you flick disks into a container.

Wish Blossom: The bloom that appears from a Wish Orb after its wish is granted.

Wish energy: The positive energy that is released when a wish is granted. Wish energy powers everything on Starland.

Wish energy manipulation: The ability to mentally harness wish energy to perform physical acts, like turning off lights, closing doors, etc.

Wisher: The Wishling who has made the wish that is being granted.

Wish-Granters: Starlings whose job is to travel down to Wishworld to help make wishes come true and collect wish energy.

Wish-House: The place where Wish Orbs are planted and cared for until they sparkle. Once the orb's wish is granted, it becomes a Wish Blossom.

Wishlings: The inhabitants of Wishworld.

Wish Mission: The task a Starling undertakes when she travels to Wishworld to help grant a wish.

Wish Orb: The form a wish takes on Wishworld before traveling to Starland. There it will grow and sparkle when it's time to grant the wish.

Wish Pendant: A gadget that absorbs and transports wish energy, helps Starlings locate their Wishers, and changes a Starling's appearance. Each Wish Pendant holds a different special power for its Star Darling.

Wish-Watcher: A Starling whose job is to observe the Good Wish Orbs until they glow, indicating that they are ready to be granted.

Wishworld: The planet Starland relies on for wish energy. The beings on Wishworld know it by another name—Earth.

Wishworld Outfit Selector: A program on each Star-Zap that accesses Wishworld fashions for Starlings to wear to blend in on their Wish Missions.

Wishworld Surveillance Deck: A platform located high above the campus where Starling Academy students go to observe Wishlings through high-powered telescopes.

Zeldabloom: Large fragrant purple flowers with yellow centers.

Zing: A traditional Starling breakfast drink. It can be enjoyed hot or iced.

Zoomberries: Small sweetly tart berries that grow in abundance on Starland.

Acknowledgments

It is impossible to list all of our gratitude, but we will try.

Our most precious gift and greatest teacher, Halo; we love you more than there are stars in the sky…punashaku. To the rest of our crazy, awesome, unique tribe—thank you for teaching us to go for our dreams. Integrity. Strength. Love. Foundation. Family. Grateful. Mimi Muldoon—from your star doodling to naming our Star Darlings, your artistry, unconditional love, and inspiration is infinite. Didi Muldoon—your belief and support in us is only matched by your fierce protection and massive-hearted guidance. Gail. Queen G. Your business sense and witchy wisdom are legendary. Frank—you are missed and we know you are watching over us all. Along with Tutu, Nana, and Deda, who are always present, gently guiding us in spirit. To our colorful, totally genius, and bananas siblings: Patrick, Moon, Diva, and Dweezil—there is more creativity and humor in those four names than most people experience in a lifetime. Blessed. To our magical nieces—Mathilda, Zola, Ceylon, and Mia—the Star Darlings adore you and so do we. Our witchy cuzzie fairy godmothers—Ane and Gina. Our fairy fashion godfather, Paris. Our sweet Panay. Teeta and Freddy—we love you so much. And our four-legged fur babies—Sandwich, Luna, Figgy, and Pinky Star.

The incredible Barry Waldo. Our SD partner. Sent to us from above in perfect timing. Your expertise and friendship are beyond words. We love you and Gary to the moon and back. Long live the manifestation room!

Catherine Daly—the stars shined brightly upon us the day we aligned with you. Your talent and inspiration are otherworldly; our appreciation cannot be expressed in words. Many heartfelt hugs for you and the adorable Oonagh.

To our beloved Disney family. Thank you for believing in us. Wendy Lefkon, our master guide and friend through this entire journey. Stephanie

Lurie, for being the first to believe in Star Darlings. Suzanne Murphy, who helped every step of the way. Jeanne Mosure, we fell in love with you the first time we met, and Star Darlings wouldn't be what it is without you. Andrew Sugerman, thank you so much for all your support.

Our team…Devon (pony pants) and our Monsterfoot crew—so grateful. Richard Scheltinga—our angel and protector. Chris Abramson—thank you! Special appreciation to Richard Thompson, John LaViolette, Swanna, Mario, and Sam.

To our friends old and new—we are so grateful to be on this rad journey that is life with you all. Fay. Jorja. Chandra. Sananda. Sandy. Kathryn. Louise. What wisdom and strength you share. Ruth, Mike, and the rest of our magical Wagon Wheel bunch—how lucky we are. How inspiring you are. We love you.

Last—we have immeasurable gratitude for every person we've met along our journey, for all the good and the bad; it is all a gift. From the bottom of our hearts we thank you for touching our lives.

Keep reading for a sneak peek at Star Darlings: *Piper's Perfect Dream*!



CHAPTER 1

In her Little Dipper Dorm room, Piper finished her last holo-text. Then she swiped the screen on her Star-Zap to queue up all the messages. Star Kindness Day was the next day. A ceremony would be held in the morning, at precisely the moment the nighttime stars and the daytime sun could all be seen in the color-streaked sky.

It happened in the morning only once a staryear. And all over Starland, Starlings met in open areas to gaze at the sight. Light energy flowed. Everyone smiled. They exchanged positive messages then and for the rest of the day—to loved ones, to strangers, and to everyone in between. Thoughtful compliments. Meaningful praise. Heartfelt affirmations. It was definitely Piper's favorite holiday.

At Starling Academy, all the students' messages would go out at once, while everyone gathered in the Star Quad before class. Piper checked her holo-texts one last time. She had her own holiday tradition: styling her compliments into poetry. What better way to get a loving message across, she felt, than using language that lifted the spirit, too?

That staryear, she'd worked especially hard on the poems. There had been many ups and downs for the Star Darlings. So much had happened already that year. All the SD missions—some successful, some not. So that day, of all days, Piper wanted her friends to feel good.

Finally pleased with her efforts, Piper tossed her Star-Zap onto a neat pile of pillows on the floor. She'd played around with poetry ideas for starweeks. *Should I use lightkus?* she'd wondered first.

That poetry originated from Lightku Isle, an isolated island with sandy, sparkling beaches, where the local Starlings spoke solely in those kinds of poems, spare and simple with only three lines of verse and seventeen syllables total.

How they managed this without even trying was a wonder to Piper. She herself strove for an effortless state of being on a stardaily basis. But the lightkus proved too difficult and limiting. So Piper went with sunnets, rhyming poems that could be any length and meter but needed to include a source of light.

The last staryear, when Piper was a relatively new first-year student, the holiday hadn't gone quite the way she'd wanted. She had labored long and hard over those holo-texts then, too. She'd wanted to reach out to every single student at Starling Academy. She'd wanted each student to feel good after reading her text; appreciated, even loved, she'd hoped.

She wrote one epic poem but it turned out to be so long and so serious no one bothered reading it. A hot flash of energy coursed through Piper, just remembering it. She'd felt like crying for stardays after.

This staryear, she was determined to get it right. She decided to focus only on students she knew well, and that meant mostly the Star Darlings. She tried to make the poems fun and light, too. Zippy, you might say. No one would think Piper particularly zippy, she knew. She tended to move slowly and unhurriedly, taking in her surroundings to be fully in the moment. But of course she had her own inner energy. And maybe this year she managed to get that across in her poetry.

Piper leaned back against her soft pillow, closed her eyes, and visualized each of her friends' smiling faces as they read her special words of encouragement. Well, maybe Scarlet and Leona wouldn't exactly be smiling. Even with her failed mission well in the past and band rehearsals on again, Leona was just beginning to bounce back.

As for Scarlet, she'd had an amazing kind of mission. After being booted out of the Star Darlings, she'd brought back wish energy and basically saved her substitute SD, Ophelia, in the bargain.

Still, it was hard to get a read on Scarlet. Piper wasn't sure what the older Starling was really thinking. One thing was crystal clear, though:

Scarlet didn't like rooming with Leona. And Leona felt the same about Scarlet. Even when those poisonous flowers were removed from the girls' dorm rooms so they couldn't spread negativity, those two just couldn't get along.

Yes, there was a lot happening at the academy, and on Starland itself. That recent blackout after Cassie's mission, for instance, had thrown everyone off balance. Even the teachers weren't immune. Headmistress Lady Stella, usually so calm and serene—and an inspiration to Piper—seemed a little edgy. And the head of admissions, Lady Cordial, was stammering and hemming and hawing more than usual.

Now, more than ever, everyone needed to be centered and positive. So really, this was the perfect time for Star Kindness Day.

As Piper thought about everything, her stomach did an unexpected flip. Maybe she should send a positive poem to herself! She stretched to pick up her Star-Zap without lifting her head, then tapped the self-holo-text feature.

Piper's picture popped up in the corner of the screen: a serene, faraway expression on her face, thin seafoam-green eyebrows matching long straight seafoam-green hair, and big green eyes looking into the distance.

For the holo-photo, Piper had pulled her hair back in a ponytail. The ends reached well below her waist. Her expression was as calm as when she swam in Luminous Lake. And that was how she wanted to feel now. Centered and peaceful and wonderfully relaxed. What poem would bring her that mind-set?

*Like the calm at the center of the storm…*Piper began writing. Then she paused. What rhymed with *storm*? *The Little Dipper Dorm*, where first and second years lived!

Like the calm at the center of the storm,
Floating like a breeze through the Little Dipper Dorm.

Again, Piper stopped to think.

With dreams as your guiding light…

(Piper was a big believer in dreams holding life truths.)

Your thoughts bring deep insight.

It wasn't her best work, Piper knew. But it was getting late and she was growing tired. Piper liked to get the most sleep possible. After all, it was the startime of day when the body and mind regrouped and reconnected. Sure, she'd had her regular afternoon nap, but sometimes that just wasn't enough.

Piper focused on dimming the lights, and a starsec later, the white light faded to a soft, comforting shade of green, conducive to optimal rest. Piper shared a room with Vega, but each girl's side was uniquely her own.

Piper knew Vega was getting ready for bed, too. But it felt like she had her own secluded space, far removed from her roommate and the hustle and bustle of school. Everything was soft and fluid here. There wasn't one sharp edge in sight.

Piper's water bed was round; her pillows (dozens of them) were round. Her feathery ocean-blue throw rug and matching comforter were round. Even her leafy green plants were in pretty round bowls. And each one gave off a soothing scent that calmed and renewed her.

"Sleep tight, good night, don't let the moonbugs bite," Vega called out.

"Starry dreams," Piper replied softly. She heard Vega opening and closing drawers, neatening everything into well-organized groups, and stacking holo-books in her orderly way. Everyone had their own sleep rituals, Piper knew, and she did admire the way Vega kept her side neat. A place for everything, and everything in its place.

Piper reached to the floor, scooping up another pillow—this one had turquoise tassels and a pattern of swirls—and tucking it behind her head. Then she realized with a start she was still wearing her day clothes: a long sleeveless dress made from glimmerworm silk. It could, in fact, pass as a nightgown. Piper's day clothes weren't all that different from her night ones. But Piper believed in the mind-body connection—in this case, changing clothes to change her frame of mind.

Piper slipped on a satiny nightgown, with buttons as soft as glowmoss running from top to bottom. Then she misted the room with essence of dramboozle, a natural herb that promoted sweet dreams and comforting sleep. Next in her bedtime ritual came the choosing of the sleep mask. That night she sifted through her basket of masks, choosing one that pictured a stand of gloak trees. It was a wonderful balance of strength and beauty, Piper thought.

Finally, Piper picked up her latest dream diary. She wanted to replay her last dream—the one from her afternoon nap. Frequently, those dreams were

her most vivid. At night Piper listened to class lectures while she slept, studying in the efficient Starling method. And sometimes the professors' voices blended with her dreams in an oddly disconcerting way.

Once, she felt on the verge of a mighty epiphany—a revelation about the meaning of light. *What is the meaning of light?* was a question that had plagued Starling scholars for hydrongs and hydrongs of years. And the answer was about to be revealed. To her!

But just when Piper's thoughts were closing in on it, her Astral Accounting teacher's voice interrupted, monotonously intoning the number 1,792. And Piper felt sure that wasn't the right answer.

But that afternoon's dream proceeded without numbers or facts or formulas: Piper was floating through space, traveling past planets and stars, when a Wishling girl with bright shiny eyes and an eager expression grabbed her hand. Suddenly, the scene shifted to the Crystal Mountains, the most beautiful in all of Starland, just across the lake from Starling Academy. It was a sight Piper looked at with pleasure every starday. But now she was climbing a mountain, still holding hands with the girl. As she led the way up a trail, the lulling sound of keytar music echoed everywhere, and she laughed with pleasure as a flutterfocus landed on her shoulder. Another flutterfocus settled on the shoulder of the girl.

"It looks like a butterfly!" the girl said, as delighted as Piper. "But sparkly!"

"And they bring luck!" Piper answered. But with each step the girls took, more and more flutterfocuses circled them. Now the creatures seemed angry, baring enormous sharp teeth. "What's going on?" the Wishling cried. She squeezed Piper's hand, beginning to panic.

"I don't know," Piper said, keeping her voice calm. "These aren't like flutterfocuses at all! They're usually quite gentle, like all animals here!" Maybe if she could say something, do something, the flutterfocuses would return to their sweet normal ways. "Concentrate," Piper told herself, "concentrate…."

Perhaps if they reached the plateau at the very top, edged with bright-colored bluebeezel flowers, the flutterfocuses would settle down.

Meanwhile, she held tight to the girl, pulling her up step by step. And finally, there was the peak, just within reach. She opened her mouth to tell the girl, "We're there," when a blinding light stopped her in her tracks.

“Oh, star apologies!” Vega had said, turning off the room light with a quick glance. Vega was very good at energy manipulation. But she wasn’t very good at realizing when Piper was sleeping.

Thinking about it now, Piper wondered why the dream, which had begun so well, had turned so unpleasant. She didn’t want to call it a nightmare. First of all, she’d dreamed it in the middle of day! Second, Piper believed that even the scariest, darkest dreams held meaning and could bring enlightenment. Piper felt sure this dream meant something important.

A Wishling girl…a difficult journey filled with danger and decisions…It was obvious, Piper saw now.

“I’m going on the next Wish Mission,” she said aloud. It would be a successful mission, too, since in her dream, she and the girl had reached the mountaintop. Her smile faded slightly. Well, they had just about reached the top.

“What’s going on?” Vega asked groggily, hearing Piper’s voice.

“Nothing,” Piper said quickly. Practical Vega wasn’t one to believe in premonitions or dream symbols.

Once, while Vega slept, Piper had tiptoed over to watch her face for signs of emotion as she dreamed. Vega had woken up and been totally creeped out to find Piper star inches away and staring. The girls generally got along, and they were friends—not best friends, but friends. And it helped for Piper to keep her insights to herself. She didn’t want to upset the delicate balance.

Now, thinking about balance, she decided on a new bedtime visualization. She pictured a scale she’d seen in Wishling History class. It had a pan on each side, and when they were balanced, the pans were level. Adding weight to one would lift the other higher.

In her mind’s eye, Piper placed a pebble first on one pan, then the other, again and again, so the scale moved up and down in a rhythm. Piper felt her head nodding in the same motion as she drifted off into another dream….



As soon as the first glimmer of morning light landed on Piper’s face, she opened her eyes. It was Star Kindness Day! She had a sense of expectation; something was about to happen.

She glanced at her Star-Zap. A holo-text was just coming through from Astra: LET'S ALL MEET AT THE RADIANT RECREATION CENTER BEFORE BREAKFAST.

Piper half groaned. She loved going to the rec center for meditation class, but she doubted Astra wanted them all to sit still and think deeply. Most likely, she wanted to organize everyone for an early-morning star ball game. Well, Piper could be a good sport, so she made her way to the center, only to find the place deserted.

Then Leona holo-texted: I'M AT THE BAND SHELL. AREN'T WE SUPPOSED TO HAVE A PRE-BREAKFAST BAND REHEARSAL, WITH AN SD AUDIENCE?

Immediately, the Star-Zap buzzed again with a message from Cassie: NO! WE'RE SUPPOSED TO MEET AT LUMINOUS LIBRARY!

Not knowing what to do, Piper went to the band shell, then to the library, then searched across the quad for the Star Darlings. But everywhere she went turned out to be wrong. Her Star-Zap buzzed again and again, with message after message, louder and louder each time, until Piper shut it off with a flick of her wrist and realized she'd just turned off her alarm.

It was another dream.

Piper quickly entered it into her dream diary. She'd have to analyze it more, but it seemed to focus on mixed-up communications—not a good sign. Frowning, she looked toward Vega's part of the room.

"Are you going to the Celestial Café?" she called out.

Vega looked at her strangely. "Of course. It's breakfast."

"Just making sure," Piper said. "I still need to sparkle shower. So I'll see you there."

The sparkle shower made Piper's skin and hair glimmer brighter, and she felt its energy like a gentle boost of power. But the dream lingered, making her feel somehow off-kilter. She couldn't shake the feeling she'd show up at the cafeteria and everyone else would be having a special picnic breakfast at the orchard, or by the lake, or anywhere she wasn't.

By then, Piper was already late. No one would be concerned, though. Piper was frequently the last to arrive. She often needed to go back to her room to retrieve a forgotten item. But sometimes it was simply because she liked to take her time. Even now she paused to add a few more notes to her diary, while the dream was still fresh in her mind. It always helped to get everything down in writing, though she could usually remember details for at least a double starweek.

Even as a young Starling in Wee Constellation School, Piper could tell her mom specifics of her dreams, right down to what color socks she wore. Starmazingly, her mom sometimes wore the same color socks in her own dreams—and their actions often matched, too.

It had been hard to make friends growing up in the Gloom Flats; there weren't many girls Piper's age. The homes were spread so far apart it didn't make sense to have a Cosmic Transporter linking houses. So Piper had always felt an extra-special close connection to her mother.

When her granddad completed his Cycle of Life, Piper and her mom both dreamed that Piper and her older brother moved in with their grandmother on the other side of town. It seemed it was meant to be. Besides, her mom and dad were busy giving meditation workshops throughout Starland. It made sense for Piper and Finn to stay with their grandma. And Piper loved her grandmother's home, a mysterious old house floozels from everything, with a musty attic filled with odds and ends and a basement that echoed with eerie noises in the middle of the night. Piper found it all oddly comforting, even if classmates refused to visit. But now she had more classmates living on her floor than there were Starlings in all of Gloom Flats. And at least some of them—the Star Darlings—were waiting for her at the café.

Shana Muldoon Zappa is a jewelry designer and writer who was born and raised in Los Angeles. With an endless imagination, a passion to inspire positivity through her many artistic endeavors, and her background in fashion, Shana created Star Darlings. She and her husband, Ahmet Zappa, collaborated on Star Darlings especially for their magical little girl and biggest inspiration, Halo Violetta Zappa.

Ahmet Zappa is the *New York Times* best-selling author of *Because I'm Your Dad* and *The Monstrous Memoirs of a Mighty McFearless*. He writes and produces films and television shows and loves pancakes, unicorns, and making funny faces for Halo and Shana.


Join the Star Darling girls on their adventures to save Starland!
Piper*s Perfect Dream
Astra*s Mixed-Up Mission
Tessa*s Lost & Found
Collection Volume 1
Sage and the Journey to Wishworld
Libby and the Class Election
Leona*s Unlucky Mission
A WISHER'S GUIDE TO STARLAND
Collect them all!
www.DisneyStarDarlings.com

© Disney